

Warnings: this story is not for the weak-hearted. Lots of death, forced cannibalism, mercy killing (strangling), child rape and molestation, experiments on children, mention of suicide, whipping, torture, scalping, abuse – that's all in this one chapter.

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A slight change in one significant moment in time sent a world in a different direction, the one of many it could've followed

A slight change in one significant moment in time sent a world in a different direction, the one of many it could've followed. It was a world where the prophecy came too late for some, and early for those who gained much from the bloody spoils of war. The change and its consequences echoed and resounded in the hollowed souls of those who cursed their once treasured life.

But, it was three children that this world forgot – left them behind in the waves of suffering, only to drown in hatred and their pain. Choices of others set them on a path, the one they would only ever know and its wake filled with blood and the smell of death. They were connected - their souls entwined seemingly as one. Only in each other they would find comfort as others did not understand their reasons.

Their dreams lay not in the future, but in the past where it would remain.

But they did not realise that their lives would stay there too.

ooooooo

What is a four-year old girl to think when she sees her parents murdered in front of her?

Hermione tried not to think at all when they forced her watch the slow

death they dealt out to her parents. She didn't want to look when they cut them open, as they whispered questions to one another – the muggles that give birth to a child with magic . . . what happens, what do they hold to do such a thing? She did not want to taste or smell the rancid, raw entrails of her parents that they stuffed down her throat - that she had to chew and swallow. She hated the mocking laughs that sounded as she threw up over and over again.

Closing her eyes couldn't block out the wails, screaming and weeping of the other children locked up in cages as she was. No amount of struggle could free her from the arms of the Death Eaters as they dragged her into the experiment labs – where they would take her blood, where they would take her eye and test her body – a place where intense pain would surely come. A place that would haunt her - turn her dreams into nightmares for almost all her life.

Hermione couldn't do anything as she watched the other muggle-borns die, as they were carted off in loads and never seen again. Tears could not heal the broken, mangled limbs of the ones tortured. A touch could not brush away the burns, the blisters and forming scars of another's. A kind, soft voice could not wipe the horrors away from the mind.

The young girl endured humiliation as the Death Eaters would strip her bare and feel her up time and again. They called her a 'little whore.' She knew not then, what whore meant – but she knew it was a bad thing. She knew what they did was wrong, wrong, wrong . . .

It would be a year later that she would be rescued when the Aurors stormed the Experimental Section. The 'Boy-Who-Lived', Neville Longbottom, had survived the killing curse and it had backfired onto the Dark Lord Voldemort – killing Him, or so they said.

But as Hermione was lost in the sea of faces of the hospitalised muggle-borns – the ones that would most-likely survive – she didn't believe He was gone. As she walked out of St. Mungos with the other

children that were to go to orphanages – she knew He couldn't be gone, not yet. Not until she could slit His throat.

She wanted His blood on her hands.

'I will kill you,' she vowed.

ooo

What child would silently watch his parents die?

A child that knew its fate would. Harry lay in the limp arms of his mother as he stared up a man that was cloaked – his wand raised. The last and only memory of his mother would be of her begging and sobbing for his life – holding him close to her chest so tightly it had hurt.

'You're mine,' the man had hissed. The three and half year old boy just nodded as if he knew what it meant.

They had dragged him into a large cage and left him in the darkness all alone. He knew not how long he had stayed in there, but it felt like an eternity. It was there, he lived for the next year, only to taken out when they injected strange liquid and blood into him. He grew to hate the light that appeared when the door opened – it promised pain, so much pain . . .

In the last few months before they took him far away from that place – Voldemort became interested in him once again. So like so many other children before him, he was brought into the Dark Lord's bedchamber and became His 'pet.' It would take years, almost all of Harry's life to heal the damage made in that place – the horror-filled night of the first time that Voldemort had roughly taken him. The blood, the whimpers, the consuming pain and most of all the feeling of utter worthlessness and shame meshed together uncaringly.

He was sullied, wrong, wrong, disgusting . . .

Over and over, he was raped.

And there, Voldemort left His mark of ownership on him - the bolt of lightning carved into his forehead.

The day he was rescued, Harry felt a flicker of hope – a feeling he couldn't remember since it was so long ago he had felt it. When they unchained him from Voldemort's bed – the revulsion on their faces made him shrink back and to hide within himself. One of the Aurors had wanted to kill him, the 'bastard's whore.' It was the shake of another's head that saved him from that fate. A faceless person that had unwittingly written their own death-warrant.

After a brief physical scan and stint at the small, make-shift hospital – they checked the records of one Harry Potter. They did not look him in the eye – their gazes hooded and cut off. He cried to be held, to sleep without nightmares, but no-one came. His pleas were drowned out by the countless others.

Then, one day, without a word or warning they dumped him on a doorstep, then gave him a letter and promptly disappeared. Leaving Harry at the Dursleys.

It was the shriek of Petunia Dursley that awoke the street and the young boy that morning.

After reading the letter, his aunt and uncle shoved him into the cupboard under the stairs, telling him it was where he would sleep as of that moment. For the next few months, Harry silently took all the hate and abuse from them.

They called him a worthless freak, a whore and others he tried to forget. As he quietly sobbed, he knew that there was no goodness in the world, that pain and loneliness were the only reality. That love

and joy were only ideas that defied the real reality.

But as he thought of the pleasure Voldemort gained from his pain – he wanted to defy that. Screw reality. If they were only ideas, then he didn't care. He would never bow down to Him. Never again.

The night Uncle Vernon tried to force himself on him – he ran. He never looked back. It was then he lost hope, lost all trust in others. He was alone in the world – they wanted something from him that he couldn't give anymore.

Harry knew something others didn't about Voldemort . . . He was alive, living on in another part of Himself. He knew there were many Voldemorts, all dormant. Horcruxes. Information was the only bonus of living in the Dark Lord's chamber.

So, as Harry stumbled into an alleyway and collapsed – he stared at his hand for a moment, then clenched it.

'I will kill you.'

oooo

How could a four year old boy stand the helplessness that filled him as the support of his very life burned and turned to ash?

Ronald Weasley couldn't. It tore him apart. He had watched as the Burrow fell to the ground, consumed by roaring flames and black smoke that greedily lapped at the heavens above. If his older brother Charlie hadn't held him back – he would've joined his parents in the fire. He had screamed, kicked, bit and wailed till he was hoarse . . . but he still wasn't let go. The tears never stopped.

Charlie's sobs and begging were lost to him. 'Ron, please, please-'

He couldn't get their screams out of his head.

A battle raged in front of them – cloaked figures against those that were not. Ron was oblivious to it. His mind couldn't comprehend, nor wanted to, that his parents were gone.

He had watched as Charlie threw him to the ground and took a bone-shattering curse full on – to protect him. He had fallen to his knees and hit Charlie's prone body to wake him up, to tell him how foolish he was, to tell him that he promised to never leave him alone.

He had stared at his little sister as she clung to his arm – wide brown eyes gazing at him imploringly. She had splatters of Charlie's blood on her and she knew not what that meant. He pulled her onto his lap and cried into her soft hair.

Ron looked up to just see the rest of his siblings be apparated away by Order members. He was silent as Death Eaters surrounded them. He never let go of his sister as they dragged him away.

They were locked into cages, next to many others. Ron would never forget what he saw and heard in them – the animalistic screams, the chest-wracking sobs, the fresh and old blood splattered onto the walls and bars. Children's faces were destroyed, the tongues of those who would not be silent were ripped out, the eyes of those who could not sleep were pulled out and those that were too quiet had their ears cut off.

Ron and Ginny watched as flies and insects ate away at a young girl's festering, broken leg. A boy in a cage above strangled himself to death with his clothes. Others begged to be killed, to get away from that hell on earth.

They said nothing – they couldn't do anything.

Death Eaters tore them apart – taking them to different labs time and time again. Ron knew not what happened to his sister as she no

longer spoke – her eyes glassy and dead, even if she was still breathing. She flinched whenever he touched her.

They teased him with fire, taunting him and telling him in detail how his parents died. They burned parts of his body, sometimes to the bone. At times they took a cord and strangled him, to till he thought he would surely die – then let him go. They laughed through this all, telling him how worthless he and his family was, how they were blood-traitors and how they were going to slowly kill Ginny.

Experiments were done on their bodies, though the pain was intense – Ron found that the pain of seeing his sister turned into a lifeless doll was worse. He wept and begged with her to just say anything.

One day, after many months within those walls – they were both taken to a room filled with Death Eaters. Ron was dragged and chained to a wall. They forced him to watch as they tore off his little sister's clothes, as they whipped her bare back and sawed off her hair, taking bits of her scalp with it. He screamed, he sobbed, he cursed – tried anything he could to just get to his sister, to protect her. They spelled him silent.

Four Death Eaters took turns raping her – while others explained to her brother that she deserved it, that he deserved the same – that they were doing a service to them as they were making their worthless lives mean something. That maybe, because of this, he could beg their great Lord Voldemort to deal out his punishment personally. They said it like it was a grand offer.

When they finished, they unchained him and he ran to his sister. She lay on her back, blood flowing freely from her wounds. Ron stared at her, cursing his tears as they fell onto her. Ginny beamed at him, a bright light in her eyes.

'I'm dying,' she murmured, 'Kill me, brother. Kill me.' She grinned up at him.

He had never seen her so happy before.

'Do it before they decide otherwise. Please.'

Ron was torn. It had seemed it they had been there forever – so much so they had given up hope of being saved. And here, his dear little sister had a chance of a relatively quick death.

He knew that he would hate himself either way.

With shaking hands, he gripped her throat and tightened his hold. Ginny didn't fight back – she died with a smile. Ron didn't hear the angry shouts and curses they spat at him as they ripped him away from her dead body. He didn't feel the raining fists that fell on him or the kicks – all he could see was her wide smile. Flashes of her filled his head – her running on the lawn at home laughing, her stuffing her face with cupcakes they had stolen together, her running after the twins in righteous anger for playing a prank on her . . .

Ron just curled up into himself and wept.

A few days later, the Experimental Section was stormed. Ron was bundled away with many other children to a hospital and healed as best they could. But Ron wasn't there – he had locked himself away in his mind, stuck in the moment where he strangled his only sister to death. Inside, he was still locked in torment for what he did.

Only when they discharged him and said that they were heading to his 'new home' – an orphanage – that he remember what the Death Eaters had done. All the atrocities they had done in the name of Voldemort. He awoke to great rage and ran away from the grabbing hands and into the streets.

Voldemort had let His minions torture them – even ordered them to do so. He was the bringer of demise – the instigator of his parents'

death and brought him so low as to kill his sister in mercy. It was all His fault.

Standing next on the bank of a river, Ron hardened his heart and whispered:

'I will kill you.'

Chapter 1 – The Entrance

(Three and a Half Years Later)

A dark brown eye peered out of a curtain of limp curls. Slowly, the girl scanned the lightening skyline with a resigned expression on her small face. She stretched for a moment, before standing up and eyeing the ground below from the metal fire-escape. She tsked softly, then set off down the rickety ladder with careful ease.

As her foot touched the paved ground, her eye fell on a cluster of blankets. She walked up to them – humming absently. After tugging a trash-can out of the way, she crouched down next to a huddled figure.

'Ron,' she murmured, brushing a stray curl behind an ear, 'Wakey, wakey time.'

Blue eyes opened bleary, then blinked up at her. A groan, then an unintelligible sound escaped the boy as he curled into himself – hiding away from light of the rising sun.

'G'way, 'Mione,' he mumbled into his frayed blanket. The girl sighed, her face turning and tilting up as she caught sight of the sign hanging from the wall.

'The restaurant owner won't hesitate this time if we don't get up,' Hermione said, frowning.

'Wha?' Ron asked, scrambling up into a sitting position, 'Oh yeah, shit . . .' He rubbed his eyes tiredly.

'Should I wake Harry?' she asked, lifting a few blankets and folding them. Ron stared at her for a moment, before nodding. The girl moved over and knelt to the next bundled up figure, not far from where Ron had slept.

'Harry?' she whispered, 'Its time to go.'

A boy with messy black hair emerged from a pile of blankets – his green eyes strangely clear and awake. Hermione looked at him, head tilted to the side and eyes curious.

'Didn't sleep?' she asked, grabbing a few blankets and set to work again.

'Nightmares,' was all he said, a small grimace on his young face. Hermione glanced at him, noting the dark rings under his eyes – but did not comment.

Ron crept closer to them, stuffing their meagre belongings into his bag. 'So, where are we going today?'

Hermione gave a small smile as she brought out a worn map, 'Round about here,' she said, pressing a dirty finger onto the paper. The boys fussed over the map for a moment as they decided their route, before freezing when a clatter entered their ears.

Ron scowled, 'Let's get outta here before the restaurant owner beats our asses. ' His eyes darted to the map, 'We can discuss it as we walk.'

The others nodded and walked out of the alley, though not without casting wary glances over their shoulders as they went. The last time they camped out in the alley, they had to scatter because the cook and owner had started yelling threats of beating them. It was not an experience to relive, they had concluded.

On the way, they darted into a run-down petrol-station's bathroom and cleaned up as best they could before the attendants shooed them out. Their destination was a long way off, so they made the risky decision of using the underground. As they were small, they

slipped under the ticket check-points – ignoring the protesting and indignant people that saw them as they hurried away, only to get lost in the protective cover of a crowd. They boarded the tube, sitting as close as they could get to an exit.

After a while, they escaped the stares they got when they left the train and came up to ground level once again.

Hermione grinned slyly, 'Look, it's exactly as I told you. Saturday is the best time.'

Ron scowled at her, as Harry watched them with an amused expression. His green eyes roved the swelling crowds with interest – watching the swaying shopping bags as the consumers walked.

Hermione smiled at him. Knowing exactly what he was thinking: perfect targets.

'Well, let's get this over and done with – I want a little breakfast,' Ron mumbled, sulking a little. A smirk crept onto the girl's face – knowing very well how frustrated Ron got with her.

'I want a big breakfast today,' Harry murmured, 'Meet you guys at the usual place?'

The others nodded and the black-haired boy glided off without another word. They looked at each other, then Ron gave her a sheepish shrug before stalking away in his own direction. Hermione brushed a curl behind her ear absent-mindedly, a dark-brown eye watching intensely. Then, turning away, in the opposite direction of Harry – she walked forward and into the mass of people.

Ooo

Harry leant against the in-turning wall of an alleyway with his arms crossed. His gaze flickered back to the building right across from him,

then to the faces of the other people. He frowned once again when he saw that their eyes slide from shop to another – completely bypassing the building in-between. There was a strange feeling around it – around the 'Leaky Cauldron.'

The corner of his mouth curled upwards.

Finally, he thought.

Ooo

A hand parted a bush to reveal a cluster of trees knitted together. Underneath the shelter of the leaves over-head – sat two children who were intently busy. Though, when the sound of crunching footsteps entered their ears, did they look up.

'Hey, ' Hermione said, then she lifted an eyebrow, 'What kept you up?'

Harry shrugged a shoulder and sat down a little way from them before rummaging around in his bag. He pulled out a few wallets and a small plastic bag. Ron whistled appreciatively.

'I dunno how you do it, mate,' he said with a grin as he opened up one of wallets. His eyes widened after he fingered the cash in it. 'Went for richy ones, did ya?'

Harry smirked slightly for a moment, but his eyes were far off – his mind elsewhere. The other two noticed this and left him to his thoughts, knowing he wouldn't appreciate them interrupting him. Hermione and Ron gathered up the notes and coins – tossing aside the wallets with disinterest, though not after laughing at the ridiculous pictures in them or on the driver licenses.

Ron decided to sell the fancy looking leather ones, even keeping one for himself just because he could. Hermione critically inspected the

designer top that Harry had snatched – looking for imperfections. They could fetch a high price for it, she was sure.

They went to get food from a few food stalls – being very careful about how much they spent at each. They did not need the police notified again about their 'activities'. Harry followed them silently, nibbling on the sandwich they had put in his hands. It unnerved them at times, how doll-like the black-haired boy became when he retreated into his thoughts – how lifeless his eyes became. But they found that they couldn't do anything about anyway, so they left him to it.

It was when they sat lounging under a tree on the edge of a park that Harry spoke.

'I found a way,' he murmured, watching them closely.

Hermione and Ron stilled and their expressions became serious.

'Truly?' asked Hermione as she gripped the hem of her jacket, till her knuckles were paling. Ron searched his face, blue eyes revealing not one of his thoughts.

Harry nodded.

Ooo

They stood side by side – three pairs of eyes locked onto the building before them. They watched as the people before them walked on blissfully ignorant and Hermione couldn't keep back an amused grin. Poor, stupid muggles, she thought - before a voice beside her cut off her musings.

'You remember that night we met, right?' Harry asked softly. They nodded and the green-eyed boy looked away. 'My goal is still the

same, and it will not change. Can I say the same for you?'

Hermione's face turned cold and spoke as if she had been offended.
'I meant what I said that night.'

Ron wore a blank expression, though his eyes were cold. 'I made a vow. I will get retribution.'

Harry's gaze darted from one to the other – then, slowly, a smile formed on his face.

'Then, what are we waiting for?'

Ooo

Author's Note: the trio are eight and half in this chapter and the war ended when they were roughly five. Please forgive me, I personally can't write with children characters (but I'm trying here!), as I know nothing about different ages, their maturity or behaviours – so the kids in my story will act a lot older, I suppose, than they really are. But my excuse is that the war forced them to change and grow up!

Anyway – till next time!

Chapter 2 – Knockturn Alley

It was Ron's gut feeling that got them into the position they were in.

Balanced on two trash cans – Harry stood on the red-head's shoulders and pulled the dirty window wide open, then he lifted himself up and through it. A moment later, his head appeared again – a finger over his closed mouth to wordlessly tell them to be quiet. He motioned to Hermione to come.

The brunette nodded and clambered up onto Ron's shoulders. Harry's waiting hands helped her up to where he was. Ron jumped up as far as he could and latched onto the ledge – grateful for the other's help in tugging him forwards.

As they sat there, slightly proud of themselves – Harry glanced at Ron. In all the time he had known him, Ron's gut feeling had proven right – no matter what situation – you listened to it. The black-haired boy suspected that maybe magic was involved, but he had yet to prove it. Maybe it was the raw, instinctual self-preservation that they needed nearly daily when it came to the gangs and streets.

But as he thought back – it wouldn't have been a good idea to barge into the pub. First off, they were children – second, they were no adults with them and third, with one word, they could be sent off to an orphanage. So yes, Ron's wonderful feeling had proven right yet again.

Instead of the amusement Harry usually felt – it was frustration that filled him. Over and over, he berated himself about his lack of thought. Everything would be different in the magical world. Their life from then on would be no longer as free as it had been in the muggle world. It was a smaller, more controlled place than the one they were used to. Anonymity would be hard to cultivate in such environment.

Harry straightened – they would have to be careful. For what they

had vowed to do was no easy task. Not by a long shot.

'Be wary,' he whispered to Hermione and Ron. They nodded solemnly – when Harry warned them – it was serious. But, the black-haired was nearly always serious anyway. When he spoke, they listened.

The room they had entered looked like a food pantry – albeit dusty and unkempt one at that. Hermione's nose wrinkled. Even though they had lived on the streets as long as they had – she still did not like dirt. If she had the chance – she'd clean everything and corner she could find. Ron had once joked that Hermione was on a mission to clean the whole of London.

The girl silently padded to the door, movements stiff as she walked and unlocked the old-fashioned door. Ron straightened and stopped her from going through the doorway with an arm – a

frown marring his features. Tentatively, he reached out to only have his fingers bounce off an invisible wall. Harry scowled and grabbed a hand of the others.

'Slide,' was all he commanded. His face tightened in concentration – feeling the magic all around them in a rush. Slowly, more so than he liked, he cut a path forward for them with the other two's aid and will behind him.

They walked forward, running past the shelves and snuck under the counter – staying in the shadows. Luckily, the pub was empty, except for a snoring drunk collapsed on a table near the back. The owner was frowning, then stalked towards the pantry where they had been and all the while he was absently drying a beer glass.

The trio stifled a sigh, knowing they weren't safe yet. Harry glanced around, an odd feeling filling him – he felt like he had been in the place before. Ron wore a similar expression and they stared out.

Suddenly, there was a loud pop and an old witch appeared out of nowhere. Without hesitation, she walked towards a door on the far side of the pub and the three children couldn't help but follow the strange woman.

She straightened her lop-sided hat, shifted her shawl and withdrew a wand from one of the many pockets on her person – as the Harry, Hermione and Ron hid in the shadows. She approached the wall and tapped a series of bricks rapidly. The children watched as the bricks rearranged themselves before their eyes to reveal a bustling street.

The woman walked forward and disappeared in the crowds almost immediately. They rushed forward, barely getting through to the alley before the wall resumed its status. Just before they were swept up into the mass of bodies before them – they got a glimpse of Diagon Alley.

The layers of buildings were awkwardly piled on top of each other – some of the walls leaning dangerously forward or back depending on how you looked at them. Some were zigzagged and distorted. If magic did not hold them up – they would've surely collapsed. There were many shops everywhere – all kinds of them. Clothes, potions, books, brooms, pets - all of it nearly too much for the three of them to take in.

There was a vibrant energy all over the place, the bustle, the smiles and the laughter. The place and atmosphere a far cry from what the three of them remembered.

Hermione grabbed each of their hands, whispering, 'No separation.'

They nodded in reply.

Harry grimaced as they sidled through the crowd, disliking the awkward bumps and brushes of others as they moved forward. The black-haired boy was not one for affection or touches. He tolerated

the odd hand-holding when it was needed – but nothing else. It was a mutual thing for the three of them – as what happened to them in the past were not pleasant in that regard.

On the surface, the place was full of life and dazzling – but as they started looking closer they saw the shadowed parts that were hidden. Children sat on the sides of the streets, cups out and begging for a spare coin. Aurors stood guard at corners and certain shops, their stern faces prepared for anything. Memorial plates on sides of buildings listing names of those honoured dead.

There was too much colour, too much forced happiness in the air and Harry was pleased when they stumbled across a dark alley branching off the one they were in. As they entered it, Harry barely glanced and took in the name of it: Knockturn Alley.

Ooo

Durand Labo Orexis was a strange man.

Many took time to tell him so, and also remarked uneasily about his lifestyle – as if their words of 'wisdom' and 'light' could change what he had done all his life. But Durand did not bother with these people. And, after a while, they left him alone.

Durand came from a middle-class, partly pureblooded family. They were neither rich, nor popular because of their neutrality in nearly every regard. Orexis's were cynical, indifferent and did not trust easily. They looked at the world pessimistically, and through this they became selfish. Empathy was not a strong point.

Durand was an average wizard, preferring to make and study potions to pass the time. He dabbled in many subjects over his life and never stuck to anything. When his family was murdered in the war not long ago, he took over the derelict family house in Knockturn Alley and opened a meagre potion shop on the first floor.

Some knew not whether to trust such a man, as Durand only cared for himself. He didn't interfere with other's businesses – preferring to watch from a distance. He had no scruples in using any means of gaining what he wanted. All that one does say in trust to him could be used in blackmail or any other way when it tickles his fancy.

Needless to say, he did not have many friends.

So, the day that his front door creaked opened and three young children slipped in – he watched them closely. They wore muggle-styled clothing, which were worn and battered. The girl with bushy brown hair looked around with only one eye as the other was covered by a makeshift eye-patch. The red-head was the tallest of the three, covered by freckles and had a long nose. The black-haired one was the shortest and his posture was controlled. Durand's interest was piqued immediately.

'There must be someone here – let's go,' the girl said quietly, her eye finding the bubbling potion Durand had left to simmer a few minutes before.

Durand took this as his cue and pushed himself off the wall, his grey eyes locked onto them, 'Why ones so young enter my shop?'

The three turned around rapidly to face him, their bodies tense and alert. It was the black-haired one that spoke first in a controlled calm.

'We were just about to go.'

One of Durand's eyebrows rose, 'Oh, lost then?'

'No,' the boy answered harshly.

'Methinks otherwise,' he murmured as he nodded towards their appearances almost in a bored way. By how they had acted so far,

he had an inkling that they were runaways. He took a step closer.

What he did not expect the rush of their aura to hit him so powerfully – it stopped him dead in his tracks. The potential! How could any family let such children out of their sight?

'Are you looking for a place to stay?' he asked after a moment, cocking his head to the side.

Three eyes narrowed, wary and silent. They didn't trust the adult. Durand had to stifle a chuckle – it was good to see they had learned that so young in life. It would help them immensely later on, as it had with him.

'I'm in need of helpers around here and you would earn your keep,' he continued, trying hard to hide his interest and eagerness in his voice.

'Why are you doing this,' it was not a question, but a demand.

'Your magic levels are suitable,' Durand said off-handedly, drifting off to the counter, 'I'm only offering, you can walk out of the door if you want – I don't care.'

He gave them a glance, before picking up a jar and opening it. Slowly, he broke up the ingredient with his fingers, before sprinkling it into the potion he had left. Durand stopped himself from looking up when he heard a footfall.

Their quiet discussion was so soft Durand could not hear. Their faces were hidden by shadows and Durand cursed the dark interior of his shop. Candle-light could only do so much and the windows were in dire need of washing.

After a brief stint of stirring, Durand lowered the flame beneath the cauldron and covered the boiling dark-blue substance with the lid.

The man brushed light-brown hair from his eyes and straightened, bringing his gaze to the children a little way from him.

They were watching him intently – so much so it was unnerving.

Durand stared right back, waiting patiently.

'What would our duties include if we were your helpers?' the girl finally asked.

'Cleaning, shop-keeping and potion making – but I'll teach you first because I'm sure my customers won't appreciate faulty attempts.'

'That all?' There was a hint of incredulity in their voices.

Durand nodded.

'Are we to room here too?' the red-head asked, suspicious blue eyes never leaving the man.

'Of course,' Durand said blithely, 'Unless you have some other place in mind. But I'm happy to oblige.'

The trio glanced at each other, then the black-haired boy murmured: 'We accept.'

Ooo

Author's Note: Durand won't be a main character in this story, but a side one that nudges the plot along a bit. There will hardly be any OC's in this story (I'll use them only when I need them as personally, I don't like them at all). You'll probably see some of the story from his prospective to show what an outsider's view of the trio is like.

Well, till next time . . .ja ne!

Chapter 3 – Transaction

'Lastly, stir it clockwise three times,' Durand instructed, his grey eyes watching her every move. When she had done as he had asked, Hermione stepped back with a small sigh. Her teacher moved in, flicking his wand point down thus dimming the flame underneath the cauldron. Without hesitation, he started chanting and hovered his wand above the surface of the substance.

Hermione stood back, her gaze following his wand's movement intently – enthralled for moment. She shook her head, trying to douse the flicker of longing in her gut. Sensing that Durand would not come out of his concentration to formally dismiss her – Hermione took her leave.

But before she disappeared up the stairs – her eye fell on the glowing wand in his hand again and she felt reluctant to depart. Being able to see magic in use fascinated her to a large degree, but from what she had gathered about Durand, he did not like people tailing him about or dillydallying. In fact, it seemed that he despised both.

The dusty stairs creaked as she made her way up. Her nose wrinkled slightly as she saw the layers of dust on the steps – the ones that had been offending her for days. Ever since they had moved in, time had been sparse and she had been putting it off. For six days – dust had become her enemy.

As Hermione took the last step and looked down the hallway – she heard the sweeping of brooms and muffled voices not far from where she was. With a sigh, she slipped through the doorway to find Harry and Ron wielding brooms and attacking the room with vengeance. She had to hold her sleeve to her mouth to stop herself from coughing.

'Guys! Join me for lunch, will ya?' Hermione almost shouted, to get their attention. Two heads turned to her and she was greeted by

smiles – a wide one from the red-head and a small, but welcome one from Harry. It was rare to see the black-haired boy show some kind of emotion and Hermione treasured each moment she got – she was sure Ron felt the same by his expression.

'Did you go shopping this morning, 'Mione?' Ron asked, setting his broom down against a covered, old-fashioned chair. The girl nodded, heading out and down the hallway to a door while they followed behind. Once in the room, Hermione looked round – feeling slightly at home, which terrified her slightly.

The cleaning of the room they had claimed as their own had been a hell of a task. Even after three days of dusting, washing, airing and scrubbing – it looked only remotely clean. To Hermione's eye, it was filthy. But it was better than sleeping in shelters and random alleyways, as Ron had irritably pointed out when she had miffed by the condition of the room.

The bushy-haired girl sat down on a ratty couch, one they had discovered it a few days before, and started unpacking a brown-paper bags that held their shopping from a muggle supermarket. As she was doing this, Harry poked the glowing embers in the fireplace grate – their make-shift, and hopefully temporary oven and heater.

As Ron and Hermione prepared their meal, they left a brooding Harry to stare into the coals thoughtfully. Since they had found their gateway into magical world – so much of what he had been planning had to be sorted out. His ideas could be done, not out of reach like before and it was almost a relief to know that simple fact.

A tingle of excitement ran through him – everything seemed possible, just right there.

'I think we should start,' Harry said, turning to the other two. 'We have wasted too much time already as it is. We should go to the library.'

A pink tinge spread on Hermione's cheeks and she looked sheepish. Harry lifted an eyebrow, and kept his smirk small.

'I, ah, started already,' she said, ducking her head.

'Well, I think both of us expected that,' Harry chuckled, glancing at Ron, who sat grinning like an idiot. 'Then you've got a head-start again, 'Mione. As usual. '

'So what did you look up?' Ron asked, grin still present as he poked Hermione's side and got a flustered scowl in return. 'Got an index, or what?'

The bushy-haired girl sat up and crossed her arms indignantly, 'Why don't we go there so I can show you?'

Ooo

'Mind magic, healing, basic defensive and offensive spells, charms and rituals –all beginners' guides.' Hermione said very fast, 'That's all I've read about so far. They were the ones that interested me the most,' she grinned, 'especially the ritual magic.'

Ron and Harry blinked, a little stunned.

'Just, how?' Ron asked aghast, 'We've been working nonstop for six days!'

The young girl shrugged. 'I don't sleep much anymore.'

Ron stilled and quietened, a flash of concern on his face. Harry stared at her, eyes narrowed.

'But it's all awfully interesting,' she said, not looking at them, 'I have this feeling . . . that I'm safe here. Strange, yeah?'

Hermione had a light in her eye, as she stared at the rows and rows of books before them. The shelves went high overhead; all kinds of books lining them while others were in piles on the wooden floor. Even though dust reined as king, it was truly a magnificent sight to behold.

It was the Orexis Library.

The day after they had arrived, the three of them had stumbled across it – once they had swept the cobwebs away of course. Each and every book was preserved by magic and its range of subjects was immense. Hermione's respect for Durand had risen a few notches after seeing the library, much to the others' amusement.

Harry knew that look on her face – she thought of the library as a challenge, one that she would complete. She just had the determination, the energy and passion to do such a thing.

'I see you've been preparing,' Harry said coolly, nodding towards the pile of books about potions on the rickety table behind the girl. 'Mr Orexis would be proud.' He smirked slightly.

Hermione made a face at him. 'Like he would.'

'This is amazing . . .' Ron murmured, sitting next to the table. He turned a page, not noticing the incredulous expressions on the other two's faces. 'How much have you read of it, Hermione?'

Big, expectant blue eyes fell on her and she only blinked.

Ron had always complained when her or Harry had made him read books, because he preferred the physical work instead. He'd take menial labour in place of a reading session any day, given the chance. It was a strange experience for the other two to see him so absorbed in a book – so much so that the image seemed wrong to

them somehow.

'Guys?' the red-head asked, a quizzical frown on his face.

'You . . . a book . . .' Hermione said slowly, dubiously, 'What the bloody hell!'

Ron stuck out his tongue at her. 'Hey, I'm not that bad . . .'

Two unbelieving snorts answered him.

Hermione pulled out a chair and sat down, her face turning to the black-haired one's. 'So, earlier, you said we have been wasting time . . . what did you mean?' she questioned, her elbows resting on her knees.

Harry's face became serious, and he stopped fingering the book that had grabbed his attention the moment before.

'Voldemort,' he started, 'is still alive. Have you forgotten that we vowed that together we would kill him?'

Hermione's face closed off, 'I will never forget that. Your point is?'

'We have to be ready. Before us are the tools and means to get our revenge – but we have not been using it and-'

'We have to secure our position here before we can make use of it though,' Ron cut in sternly, 'We have to earn our keep. Once the majority of the work is done we'll have time to ourselves to use as we wish.'

'Also, once we get used to the workload – it'll become easier to handle, it won't be as time-consuming,' Hermione added.

'Its just that time seems to go by so fast since we found the Leaky

Cauldron . . .' Harry murmured, leaning against the table. 'I feel useless when we do nothing about it.'

'But we have, mate,' Ron said genially, 'By getting a place to stay and working to keep it so. Gotta start small, yeah?'

A piece of parchment was pulled out of the red-head's pocket with a flourish and he grinned. 'Plus, I've been looking into some things . . .' he handed the parchment to them, 'I asked Mr Orexis for a list of shops in Knockturn Alley.'

Hermione beamed at him, 'Brilliant, Ron!' and they started inspecting it together.

'Wands . . .' Hermione mumbled, eyes glued onto a shop's name on the list: The Rowan Branch.

Excitement bubbled inside of her at the mere thought of finally using magic.

Ooo

It took a week to get enough money to pay for three wands – they had been pick-pocketing and stealing when ever they could, juggling the rest of the time between cleaning and their ruthless tutelage in potion-making. Durand had yet to make them do shop-keeping duty, as he had said that they were too short and couldn't see over the counter so it would be a folly to do that. Ron swore he heard the man say under his breath that some of his customers would not be pleased to be left in the care of some precocious dunderheads.

As they walked down the hallway, to the stairs – Ron groaned as he clicked his back. 'God, we're gonna have to get another, paying job after this. I ain't gonna stand all day in the streets again like we did, I can tell you that. All that coming back and forth . . .'

Harry frowned, he had been considering the same thing for days – they couldn't support themselves or get all the things they would need in the future if they weren't paid. Their job at the potion shop paid for their room and nothing more.

As they headed for the front door, they grabbed their cloaks – the ones Durand had paid for as they needed another set of clothing to work in (they had to pay him back later sadly). They were a very plain black and were of coarse material, but they were marvellous to the three children.

'Rog's Transaction first, right?' Hermione asked, pointing at a small, dark shop down the cobbled road, peeping at them from the corner.

Harry nodded, 'Got to change our pounds for galleons.'

They trudged up the dreary road in silence, stopping only when a haggard woman blocked their path and started showing them rats' heads she had for sale. Only after Harry shot her a murderous glare did she draw back into the shadows of the building, babbling nonsensically to herself.

Hermione knocked on the narrow door and they waited quietly for an answer. About two minutes later, a small and ugly goblin opened the door. The bushy-haired girl instantly recognised it from drawings in a book about magical creatures she had picked up. It stared at them suspiciously.

'What do you want?' he snapped, his bulging eyes darting from one to another.

'We require your services, sir,' Hermione said as politely as she could in face of such a repugnant creature. It scowled, seemingly ready to tell them to leave, but the girl cut him off. 'We only need a small amount of your time, sir.'

The goblin took a deep breath, deliberated for a few moments and then slowly made way for them.

Inside, they sat down on a couch, Ron in the middle of Harry and Hermione. Their gazes were locked onto the creature, which placed itself behind a huge desk. It peered over at them, calculating bead eyes on them.

'What is it that you want?' it asked tightly, knobbly hands clasped together before it.

'A change in currency, sir. Pounds to galleons, if you please,' Hermione said slowly, her dark brown eye staring right back. 'We hope that it would not inconvenience you, sir.'

One of the goblin's hairy eyebrows rose, 'I have never dealt with small humans before, let alone decent ones.' It gave them a sudden, feral grin. 'I'm Rog. '

The three of them hid their surprise as best they could and Harry was the first to get himself together. 'Greetings, Mr Rog,' then gave him a nod of his head.

'Greetings to you too,' he said, grin still in place. Hermione had to stop herself from shuddering – the goblin looked like he had a Chelsea smile. (1)

'So, shall we commence our business?' Rog asked.

'Yeah, please,' Harry answered, and got up to the table – pulling out a wad of notes. 'We would like to change this amount, sir.' He handed the money to the goblin, watching his every move.

Rog got out of his chair almost lazily and walked to a drawer, 'Ah, so this will be a simple transaction, Mr . . .?'

'Potter, sir,' the green-eyed boy answered absently, eyes following the bony fingers counting the gold coins. The flash of gold, silver and bronze in the candlelight with the soft clinks as they fell against each other . . . it was mesmerising to the three children. But Harry was trapped in a desire far greater than they other two were in. His reverie was only broken by Ron's hand shaking his shoulder.

'Harry?' Ron asked, concern ghosting in his blue eyes. Green eyes stared at him in a daze for a moment before clearing. He glanced at the wizard money in the goblin's hands, then back to his two friends. He gave them a wry, awkward smile.

A flicker of understanding flashed in their eyes and Ron took his hand away.

'Wonderful to do business with you three,' Rog said, putting a draw-up pouch in Hermione's waiting hands. His gaze darted from one to another. 'Should I surmise that you will be coming again soon?'

Her mouth quirked up in amusement and said, 'Maybe, Mr Rog.'

The goblin chuckled and gave them a quick bow before they left.

When the door clicked closed behind them, Harry walked quickly ahead, trying to puzzle out as to why he had had that reaction . . . he had never felt like before! Was something wrong with him? Or was it magic, perhaps?

'Blimey, mate – get that expression off your face! Everyone has their vices and money happens to be yours by the looks of it,' Ron said, a sly grin on his face. Harry stared at him.

'But I never reacted that way when I handled the muggle money we had . . .' he murmured, a frown marring his features.

'Cause this is rare metals we're talking here and wizarding ones at that, mate. '

Harry's gaze wandered back to the pouch the goblin had given Hermione.

The girl watched him and she smiled when he looked up at her. 'Don't worry, Harry. We'll make sure you don't go crazy.'

He scowled at them and at their backs when they walked on ahead laughing. As Harry pulled his cloak closer to himself in an effort to keep warm, he whispered softly:

'Thank you.'

Ooo

Footnotes:

(1)'A Chelsea Smile is a nickname for the practice of cutting a victim's face from the edges of the mouth to the ears: the cut - or its scars - form an "extension" of what resembles a smile. Sometimes to further hurt or even kill the victim, he or she would then be stabbed or kicked, most notably in the stomach (or in case of kicking, the groin), so that the face would be ripped apart when the victim screamed.' –

Author's Notes:well, another chapter is done . . . I can't help but feel that this story is going too slow . . . maybe its just because I'm listening to slow, soft music lately :) 'Hide and Seek' by Imogen Heap is amazing. –starts humming along-

Chapter 4 – The Wand-Maker

The sign swung back and forth slightly in the wind, the painted words flashing in the light: the Rowan Branch. Beneath the curling letters lay a little picture of two small twigs of rowan tied together with red thread to form an equal-armed cross and, as far as Hermione could remember, it was a depiction of a protective amulet used long ago.

She stood next to the two boys, butterflies in her stomach. Magic! She was getting a wand and soon she would be able to use magic! Excitement bubbled inside of her, though she did not show it on the outside – that was childish and she had decided to leave that part of her behind her the day they killed her parents.

The girl could feel her magic, though dormant most of the time, rise up in anticipation.

Turning her head to side, she caught the others' eyes and nodded, to which they returned. Ron opened the door first and walked in, their entrance heralded by a small chime above. Blinking, their eyes adjusted to the dim light of a few candles.

Their eyes were drawn to an old, heavy-set man lounging in a chair, with his feet propped up on his desk as he read the Daily Prophet. He had a balding head and white hair and beard. His small, light eyes were screwed up as he leaned forward to read.

The three children walked forward, their footfalls were purposefully loud to get the man's attention. He scrambled up and out of his comfortable chair, then whipped a pair of glasses onto his nose. His gaze cleared and a broad smile broke out on his face.

'Why, hello, young'uns,' he said jovially, 'What brings yeh to me shop, eh?'

They bowed quickly before Ron spoke up, 'We're here to purchase some wands, sir.'

The man blinked, then a thick and wild eyebrow rose. 'Aren't yeh too young fer tha', laddie?'

'We not of the same opinion on that matter then, sir. If it is too much of a problem we'll resume our business at Ollivan-'

'Oh, no need ta go tha' far, boy-o. I can tell yeh fer a fact tha' me wands are far greater than tha' bloody fraud's are. At least me wands don't have those bleedin' Ministry trackin' spells on 'em.'

They stared at the man.

'Ha, got yer attention there, right? Me name's Adam Gregorovitch,' the old man said, extending his hand to them to shake, which they took.

'If you don't mind me asking,' Hermione piped in, 'Why are you allowed to sell wands when they're not monitored by the Ministry? How come they let you?'

Gregorovitch grinned toothily and leaned in, whispering, 'They don't know I sell 'em, in their records I sell potion ingredients. '

'But we were told you sell wands,' Ron said, eyes wandering to the strange assortment of objects in the room. Dusty, filled jars lined the walls on the shelves, and at times, in-between tattered books. The paint on the walls were flaking and peeling off.

'By who?'

'Durand Orexis,' Harry supplied.

'Ah, tha' ol'bugger! Gotta have a chat with 'im then – haven't seen 'im

in ages . . . ' Gregorovitch mumbled, a small smile on his face. He shook his head, ridding himself of the far-away look in his eyes. 'So, do yeh wanna get started?'

'Yes, sir,' Hermione said, nodding slightly.

Gregorovitch sidled up against a wall to escape his desk and beckoned for them to follow. They walked into a small room with even more jars and boxes than in the front – much to their bewilderment. They didn't know it was possible to stuff so much into any space.

'Who's first?' the man asked as he eyeballed them, wiping his glasses with a grubby piece of cloth from his pocket.

They glanced at one another – Harry and Ron were urging her to go forth. Hermione sighed and shot them a scowl before walking forward warily. Gregorovitch grinned and took out a measuring tape, tapping it with his wand so it started its job of measuring nearly every part of her body.

Gregorovitch disappeared behind one of the piles of papers on the small table in the middle of the room. Muttering and curses could be heard as parchment flew to the floor haphazardly. It was hard for the boys to keep a straight face.

Hermione's mouth was pursed in a thin line. Why would he need the measurement of one of her nostrils, of all things? And one of her eyebrow hairs?

'Mr Gregorovitch, sir?' she asked tightly. She could barely keep the scowl back.

'Wha'?' he asked irritably, his head poking out from a column of paper, 'Oh, sorry, lass.' He flicked his wand and the tape flew to his hand. At least he had the decency to look sheepish.

'Al'right, come here.'

The brown-haired girl edged closer, peering at the narrow, small boxes that the old man had lined up on a surface made of wooden crates. She glanced up at the man questionably.

'Find which one feels righ' ta yeh, kay? Go on,' he said, smiling encouragingly. She reached out, her hand hovering above the lids. Slowly, she moved her hand from one box to the next - frowning. 'It's not any of these, sir.'

Gregorovitch's eyebrows rose, 'Really?' He darted away again and came back a few moments later holding two more boxes. He was frowning.

Hermione immediately reach out for the box in his left hand. Her eyes widened.

'My hand . . . it moved on its own,' she murmured, staring.

'Well, tha' is wha' the feelin' should be,' Gregorovitch said, winking. He led her to another shelf, motioning to her to inspect. The girl watched as her hands reached out without her permission to two jars. She looked at her hands quizzically, not even noticing the objects within the glass.

The man took the jars from her and he frowned once more, though briefly. He gathered the amounts he needed from both and carefully handled them.

'Kay, one of the boys next,' the heavy-set man said, taking out his measuring tape. The same routine went with the Ron and Harry and then the wand-maker shooed them out into the front of the shop while he made their wands.

They sat on the floor, murmuring to one another about the experience and what they felt – speculating what magic it could've been. They were well into an argument whether it had been between innate magic and the wand actually choosing the person when Gregorovitch emerged.

The man tiredly heaved himself into his chair behind his cluttered desk, bearing three slim boxes under his arms. He opened one and nodded to the bushy-haired girl.

'Here yeh are, lass. Ten inches long, made of red rowan with ground bloodstone an' dragon heartstring fer the cores. Quite hard and sturdy. Bleedin' good wand all round for healin', I'd reckon,' he said, smiling at her, though it did not reach his eyes. Wariness crept up on her and she stilled.

'What's wrong, sir?' she asked, her fist curling inwards.

A look of confusion flashed on his face before he rid his face of it. 'Nah, nutin' is wrong, girly.'

She lifted an eyebrow and did not say more. She took her wand - a warm, tingling feeling flooded her body and a bouquet of flowers sprouted out of the end, much to the surprise of the children.

Gregorovitch called Harry forward.

'Eleven inches, made of white willow. Soft an' light, but also tough, make no mistake. Swishy, nice fer charms work. A feather from the cunnin' crow o'ill-omen – a rare core ta have, boy-o,' the white-haired man said softly, seriously.

Harry raised an eyebrow, then held out his hand to grasp the wand. A mass of red sparks erupted out of the tip, dancing around the room – breaking the tense atmosphere for a moment as they were teased by the magic.

'Come here, lad, here's yours,' the wand-maker said to Ron, who planted himself before the desk. 'Fourteen inches long an' made out o'hawthorn, reasonably springy. Hairs of a wolf as a core – wonderful fer defence magic an' wardin'.' Ron went slightly pink.

A shower of small stars rained on them, much to their amusement when Ron held his wand. Harry and Hermione had tried to catch a few but they slipped through their fingers.

'So, that'll be three galleons each . . .'

Ooo

They sped down the street, all the while having a mock spell battle –using their hands as wands for they dared not use their wands yet as they knew little of how to control their magic. They skipped out of the way of the imaginary spells and laughed merrily at each other's antics.

Hermione had never felt so happy. She loved it when Harry's face was open, even a little bit, and the fact it had been so a lot more since they had entered the magical world. Ron had even lessened his faking and had cried once in her presence – something he had done very, very rarely in all the time she had known him.

They all felt normal and just right in and amongst the magic – like they belonged.

It was nice to pretend, for just a moment, that everything was all right. It was worth the painful longing that would surely come, the yearning for a joy they had never or could ever have – it was something, something to hold onto in their nightmares.

Just as they turned a corner, a vague thought crossed her mind – the man had never asked for their names.

Ooo

A troubled expression fell onto Gregorovitch's face as he watched the three children go down the street through a grimy window. He stared at their laughing faces, their light steps as impassively as he could. They were so young, so very young to have such wands . . .

He sighed as a soft sadness embraced him.

With such cores and even as he made the wands – he knew they would do terrible things. The old man knew not where this feeling came from, and it did not leave him. He had had a brief desire to not give them the wands, even destroy them . . . but he knew they would need them. The lack of parents and guardians, the quiet maturity they held – the likes which a child should never hold – and their wide, jaded eyes told him all he needed to know.

Life had not been kind to any of them.

He needed to forget those three faces, to rid himself of the melancholy that had clasped him. He had to stop his wandering about their stories, the horrible things that had happened to them to make them who they were and who they would become.

The man had been there, in the war. He had been a part of the rescue groups to save children from the enemy. He had witnessed terrible, terrible acts against the young and had to pick up the pieces that were left behind. He couldn't help them all – there were just too many . . .

Oh, he had to forget them . . . even if it was for purely selfish reasons, or to save them of his pity - he did not know.

Ooo

Author's Notes: Gregorovitch is probably only going to appear once more in this story – he actually exists in the Harry Potter world, but I made him quite OC :P He was the wand-maker that Voldemort killed in the seventh book to get the Elder wand. I just had to add him in because it was mentioned that he went out of the wand-making business in the late 1980's – the time the trio get their wands in my story incidentally :)

Sorry for the wait, but voila! Here is the next chapter.

Chapter 5 – An Unwelcome Presence

Much to Harry's amusement, the first spells they ever cast were cleaning ones.

But they only did so two weeks after they had purchased their wands, as Hermione had insisted that they learn magical theory and all they could – wisely proclaiming that it would be foolish into rush things. Through this they learned that because they were young their magical cores were growing, adjusting and highly unstable – prone to outbursts of magic, which could be dangerous. It was the reason parents were hesitant to get their children wands before the age of eleven.

Practicing these spells was not easy as they had to learn to control and calm their cores. At times, their spells only had a wisp of magic behind them, or too powerful that once they had caused a broom to explode. They were reduced to scouring the Orexis Library again and again to find an answer.

But it was Hermione who figured it out.

'Meditating,' was all she said, before she dragged them into the muggle world. They had dropped into a few bookstores and shoplifted a number of books about the subject. The friendly and motherly shop-attendants hadn't known what had hit them. Ron had left notes to thank them and, mostly, to add insult to injury, making his two friends snigger as they slid out of the stores.

They had locked themselves up in their room back at the potion shop and started mixing the muggle use of meditating with magic. They copied concepts and applied them in numerous tests. Harry also found, by chance, a mention of a technique used by the wizards of old to let them go into trances, or highly relaxed states. They found the book at the back of the Library – a near trek to get there. But it helped them greatly and inspired many ideas.

After a few days, they had successfully sensed their cores.

It amazed them how much their magic had calmed down after they had connected with them, even though they only did so for barely a moment. Ron noticed that their magical outbursts were connected to their emotions and proposed to investigate a way to control them, or at least watch how they felt.

At first, to get used to meditating, they set three different times aside a day dedicated to touching their cores. It took them a long time in the beginning to relax and slip into the state of mind they needed to be able to go deep within themselves. They woke early, more so than usual, to

accommodate their work and lesson hours – but over the next few weeks it took less time as they slowly mastered their created technique.

Ron was surprisingly the best at going into the trance – he could slip into it within seconds. When Harry and Hermione asked why, he merely shrugged and said, 'I know my emotions.'

Waking up and meditating became a habit, as doing it before going to bed. They had never slept so well, so deeply and felt refreshed. Though, most nights one or two of them would be awake to hide from the nightmares that plagued their sleep. Hermione was the worst victim – so much so she practically lived in the Library at night.

Ron had thoughtfully placed a mattress next to her favourite sitting place there. He still fervently denied he had done so, even though they all knew that they had heard him. He didn't take embarrassment well.

It was ridiculous how fast it took them to clean the house with the aid of magic. Durand had emerged from his chambers one morning to

find a squeaky clean shop – the three children had never seen him so bewildered, standing next to blindingly white curtain, which had been formerly a murky brown.

Durand Orexis' potion shop officially became the cleanest place in Knockturn Alley. Even though that didn't mean much, but they couldn't help but feel a little proud of themselves.

Hermione was thriving under the cleaning crusade they were doing – her mood got brighter each day and each new clean room. She said that she thought clearer when things were spick and span. Ron and Harry humoured her, knowing she was quite the hellion when they disagreed, due to painful experiences. They would never underestimate the bushy-haired girl any day.

They moved on in their spell range, practically inhaling all the read and they could be found many a late nights in the Library practicing new spells. They still couldn't use too much of their magic, due to the fact their bodies needed it to grow properly and couldn't take exhaustion too well.

Durand never asked how and when they their wands, but used this to proceed further in their lessons, taking on harder and more delicate potions. The man was quite a ruthless teacher and did not accept mediocre – he pushed them hard and stretched their limits. Something they were thankful for.

The days seemed to fly by and the trio were so caught up that most days they forgot the time, not knowing if it was day or night – nor the date.

But they felt they were finally getting there.

Ooo

The glowing tip of Harry's wand slowly, gracefully arched as he

whispered the dust removal charm. He trailed his wand at eye-height, just before the dust-coated books lining the shelves. The black-haired boy was near the back of the Library, on his cleaning duty as Hermione had dubbed it, and found he didn't mind doing his task. Charms were his best point and there was something pleasant in watching the dust disappear, like he coaxing a secret out from hiding.

His green eyes lazily read the titles of the revealed books, mild interest now and then sparkling. There was so much they had not read in the Library! Harry stopped and pulled out a book, fingering the hard leather cover absently as he flipped through the pages and read passages.

Then he froze, eyes widening and his hands shook slightly. The books fell out his arms, clattering to the floor – the sound echoing. Harry backed away, only stopping when his back hit the shelf behind him.

He stared at the book with loathing.

He fervently wished he had never picked it up, or touched it. The diagrams, the drawings and spells . . .

All dark magic.

The boy straightened, and started walking down the aisle, away from the book on floor. His pace was fast, slightly frantic and he only stilled when he came across Hermione meditating on her mattress. She opened her eyes languidly and frowned at him after seeing his expression and pose.

'What's wrong?' she asked, slowly stretching out of her cross-legged position.

'I . . .' Harry started, then he looked at the floor. The girl tilted her

head to the side.

'A book . . . of dark arts,' he whispered, half his face hidden by dark-strands.

'Ah,' she replied, and got to her feet. 'I have chanced across them at times.'

Harry's eyes shot to her, narrowed and cold. The girl stared back at him calmly, her brown eye half-lidded – showing the relaxation that filled them all after a bout of meditating. She looked like she had barely come out of it.

'I haven't read any,' she said, closing the book of mind magic on her desk. They had found that meditating helped them in their learning of Occlumency and Legilimency. 'I expected to find some in here – Mr Orexis strikes me as the kind of person that would be interested in everything, and not a goody goody.'

That got a wry grin out of Harry. The image of a nice Durand was just . . . wrong.

Hermione sighed, crossed her arms and leant back against the edge of the desk. The boy noticed how tired so looked and couldn't help but feel concerned. Harry didn't like to admit it, but he really liked having his two friends around.

'I didn't . . . no, couldn't read them. It would just put a name to the things that have been done to me. I'd rather not remember,' she said, her face blank as she stared at the pile of books on her desk.

Harry nodded and felt a little sad and bitter. Could they ever be free of what had happened to them? No, he thought, we never will as long as we will live. He rubbed his eyes tiredly.

'I'm going to get some food,' Harry said abruptly. He couldn't stand

the atmosphere in the Library anymore - he had to get away from Hermione's haunted eyes. He didn't want to remember – none of them wanted to. Best forget, for a little while at least.

Harry left the Library and stalked down the hallways to the kitchen. They had asked Durand to let them use a part of the ancient family kitchen for their food-making and he had only agreed when Hermione angrily asked him whether or not he wanted starving workers and the Ministry after him for child negligence.

The black-haired boy found his employer lounging in a chair, reading the Daily Prophet intently and sipping a cup of coffee. He looked up from the paper and said, 'Mr Borgin contacted me again today about the cleaning proposition.'

Harry walked to the counter, opened a drawer and drew out a mug. 'What was he offering?' He got the jar of coffee and put two teaspoons in. With a flick of his wand, the water in the kettle started to heat up.

'Ten galleons for the whole shop,' his mentor replied, turning a page. 'And you three have to sign a waiver that does not allow you to speak of what you find in his shop to others.'

The black-haired boy shrugged, 'Fair enough.'

The water was boiling and he poured it into his mug. He grabbed a chair and sat down, on the other side of the table from Durand. The smell of coffee was glorious. He hadn't slept last night due to nightmares.

'So, will you accept?' Durand pressed, 'The old man has been annoying me to no end.'

Harry's eyes were watching the steam rising off the surface of his coffee and said absently, 'Yeah, yeah.'

'See, that was easy . . . why did you decide to take so long to do so?'

'We wanted to see how much he needed our services, plus the more desperate he got, the more he was willing to haggle, Mr Orexis.' Harry replied. 'I still can't believe he offered three knuts each at first . . .' The boy scowled at the table.

Durand chuckled, 'I'll tell our dear Mr Borgin that you accepted, Mr Potter. He will most pleased.'

'Why, thank you, sir,' Harry said, with mock-pompousness as he inclined his head haughtily. Durand smirked in amusement, then returned to his reading.

Ooo

The next day found them in Borgin and Burkes, casting cleaning spells in fast succession – bewildering some of the customers that came along their paths. Hermione was attacking the storage room at the back of the building – grinning evilly as she did what she did best. Ron was upstairs in the offices with Mr Burkes as a watcher, who denied he was one, making sure the red-head didn't look at their files and information. Harry had taken up the store front.

A glare was shot his way from Mr Borgin, who was calming a woman who had bumped into Harry as he was cleaning. Apparently glaring daggers at potential customers was a bad idea, Harry mused with mirth. He gave a smirk back in return to the man.

The boy animated three booms and spelled them to sweep the floor. A few dust removal charms were cast and Harry inspected the room with a critical eye. It was filthy! He had a while to go.

The black-haired boy busied himself and smirked when Mr Burkes' disbelieving expression entered his vision – Ron had finished

upstairs and said he was joining Hermione in the storage space. The men who owned the store were shocked at how efficient the children were.

Harry's two friends emerged two hours later with satisfied expressions and joined his efforts at the front. They were nearly done when it happened.

The door swung open with a groan and a tall man entered, sweeping over to the counter. His footsteps were soft, but strong and his aura was piercing. All three of their heads shot up and they stilled in their work.

Harry eyed the figure with interest – the man was cloaked and held the absolute attention of the owners, a great feat in itself. Then, the man reached up and pulled his hood down, revealing long, white blond hair. Harry's whole body froze, the blood drained from his face and his heart beat against his breast madly.

No.

It was hard to breathe.

No, no.

The blond man's face turned slightly as he pointed at a shelf and the boy had a glance of his face. There was no mistaking it. It was him.

No, no, no, no ,NO!

Harry stumbled back, wide-eyed and hyper-aware. His small back hit a shelf and he started feverishly. His head was shaking from side to side in denial. He couldn't believe his eyes.

No, it can't be.

Mr Burkes said something and the man smirked back. Harry's insides sunk. He knew that smirk. Very well.

He's supposed to be dead!

He stared and suddenly he felt a hot fire rise up in his gut. His hands twitched and all he could think of was gripping the man's neck and strangling the life slowly out of him. He wanted to see the fear and despair in the man's pale eyes. He had never wanted something so much.

Harry forced himself back, to turn away from the counter, to walk out of the door and up the street.

He was filled with so much loathing he felt like he would burst. Hate burned fiercely throughout his body and made the blood roar in his ears. His nails had drawn blood from his palms as he had them in fists.

'Harry! Harry!' he heard a voice call. He quickened his pace – he felt so much anger he didn't know what he would do.

'Harry, what's wrong?'

Hermione grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop when he didn't answer. The black-haired boy tensed and slapped her hand away sharply. He turned and his scowl was almost feral.

The bushy-haired girl stepped back and cleared her face of expression.

'Harry,' she murmured.

Ron ran up to her side and saw their expressions. He frowned at the red mark on Hermione's hand. His blue eyes were questioning as they fell on Harry.

'Go away,' Harry snarled at them, knuckles white and stretched thin.

'Harry, just say it,' Hermione said coldly. 'Just fucking say it.'

'No.'

'Then go back there and get yourself killed – because I don't give a shit if you don't try,' she said in a low voice, 'Or maybe I should kill you here so you don't give away our intentions in your anger.'

Harry stared at her with calculating eyes. He could feel the anger drain at her words. He was being stupid and irrational. Things that none of them could afford.

'He hurt me,' he murmured softly, with empty eyes. 'In the war.'

His two friends softened their expressions and nodded slightly. They didn't need to say a word, and knew not to ask further. He did not need their pity, as it was meaningless to them. At that moment, Harry had never felt so thankful that he had Hermione and Ron at his sides.

Ooo

A small, milky white hand gripped the spine of the book and lifted it from the floor. It was dark in-between the tall shelves of books and the only source of light was from a floating candle next to the boy's head. He peered at the few crumpled pages with an impassive expression.

The hand smoothed over the pages and he closed the book. Green eyes slowly rose and found the empty space where it had been. His hands shook slightly, knowing that in that moment he had a choice to make – one that would change him completely, inevitably. No matter what he chose, there would be consequences.

His eyes went from the space in the bookshelf, to the length of the aisle he had come along. He knew he had to face this, to walk on ahead and grow. But that thought didn't make what he had decided any easier. He was afraid that he would not be strong enough for the road he had chosen – that he would fail.

But, those thoughts were pushed aside and the boy hardened his heart.

Harry turned and walked down the aisle, with book in hand.

Ooo

Blue and brown eyes watched as he came into the circle of light emanating from a candle. The boy and girl were sitting on the edges of the glow, their faces in shadow and eyes mirroring the flickering flame. Books lay closed or open and scattered across the wooden floor, the visible pages faintly coloured orange by the candlelight.

Harry stood before them in silence, staring straight back at their guarded eyes. He tossed the book to the floor in front of him and landed with a thud. The three eyes fell on the title displayed and a strange, fleeting emotion flashed in them.

'I will do anything to achieve what I vowed to do,' the black-haired boy murmured, low and controlled. 'I will even immerse myself in darkness.' He took a deep breath and smothered the fear he felt, 'I have my reasons.'

Hermione held up a hand, 'You don't have to explain, Harry. I understand.'

'Me too,' Ron replied, 'And I accept it.'

'So . . . are you with me or not?' Harry asked, trying to keep all emotion from his face. He shouldn't be this scared of what they

would choose - that they could leave him alone again because of what he had chosen. He had to stop the hope that rose up eagerly, almost tentatively – hope had not gotten him anywhere in his life, it had always hurt.

The silence was almost tangible as three eyes watched him.

'We promised that night we met that we would stick together,' Ron said quietly and slowly, 'and I plan to keep that promise, mate.'

'I mean what I say,' Hermione said, 'so stop questioning our loyalty, you dumbass.'

Harry chuckled and felt his nervousness roll off him with it. 'You astound me with your eloquence and mastery of the English language, my dear lady.'

'Hey, don't push it, mister,' she retorted, and both boys could see she was fighting a smile. Harry gave her a mock bow and grinned.

Ron pulled the book towards him and his two friends sat on either side of him – tense and achingly aware of the magnitude of what they had chosen. In the dim light of a candle, together they opened the book and as one, they said the first words.

Side by side, they walked hand in hand into the realm of the Dark.

Ooo

Author's Note: So starts their decent from heaven to hell. Like the fallen angels, I guess. It only gets worse from here. Things are hopefully going to go a bit faster from now on.

Chapter 6 – Joined

(2 and half months later)

A piece of chalk was guided by delicate fingers and drew a full circle. Another's hand drew a charcoal triangle within, the dark vertices touching the contrasting white. A third hand drew glowing runes with a wand above the circled points.

When they ceased their etchings on the stone floor, they got up and each walked to one of the points. They stood tall and naked, not shy in the least, as they were of that age and living on the streets together hadn't allowed such privacy. They had seen a lot of each others' bodies when they had to bandage up wounds from gang fights.

As one, they started chanting softly, calling on their innate magic to allow the wild equivalent in. They invoked the slumbering spirits to listen, to feel their essence and to understand. The air was heavy with energy and the three cores of magic were swept up in the rising storm.

Five eyes opened in a sudden flash and they intoned, ' . . . by oak, ash, and thorn we commend thee.'

They dropped their clasped hands to their sides.

'With magic,' Hermione said clearly, her core magic illuminating her outstretched hand for a moment before being absorbed in the concentration before them. Harry and Ron let their magic join her's.

'With mind,' Ron said, then opened his mouth wide, a trailing and ghostly strand flew off his tongue and into the storm. Hermione and Harry let their minds join his.

'With heart,' Harry said, placing a hand over his breast. He drew back

his hand and blew a red, pulsing energy off his palm. Hermione and Ron let their hearts join his.

Their hands drew together in front of their chests, forefingers pointing towards the heavens while the thumbs touched – forming a triangle. The children trembled under the pounding of the pure magic and the sweeping intensity of it all. They had never felt so out of control and insignificant next the utter rawness of the magical energy around them. It was so heavy that it lined their very veins and their bodies' throbbed painfully as their blood tried to absorb the magic as quickly as it could.

'Obligo!' they shouted together, breaking apart their hands.

The jarring magic burst and shot towards them. They cried out in pain and shock as the magic forced itself into them. Their senses were run amok as their sensitivity was increased and abused. They were hardly coherent as they felt out to one another - with touch, mind and magic.

Together, they all thought before it went pitch black.

Ooo

The door whined as he pushed it open. Durand poked his head in, worry and anxiety plain in his eyes and expression. He had felt the surge of magic – he had never felt anything like it. His mind was still reeling from the initial outburst. The very stones of the house were still trembling.

His grey eyes spied out three shapes in the haze of the residue magic and debris. Their chests were falling and rising – alive. The man saw a smudged diagram on the floor, beneath the children and his eyes widened.

As he drew back into the hallway, he wondered if they fully

understood what they had done. He shook his head and made his way to his lab.

What the children did was none of his business, he understood now. They would never come to him for help, besides in potions . . . they would run straight into things and learn alone, no, together. They only ever had each other.

And it would stay that way no matter what others did.

Ooo

Unseeing eyes stared straight ahead and Hermione sat limply against wall. She was completely white and shaking terribly. She didn't want to feel – to never feel again in her life. But she knew that would never be so and she hated it.

'Holy fuck . . . Harry . . . Ron . . .' she murmured with horror. She gave in and curled into herself –sobbing hard into her knees.

Why had so many terrible things happened to them? They never deserved such acts against them – they were hardly grown then, even now, and knew no better. It had been their reality. And still was in many ways.

'Oh Ron . . . Harry . . .' she said in a breathy whisper.

An anguished scream echoed, sounding more animal than human, and then another. Hoarse coughs and chest-wracking sobs. Hermione couldn't move – her body felt like stone. She had never felt so tired in her entire life.

All she wanted was to sleep and to forget.

She still couldn't believe what she had seen, in her two friends' minds, in their memories . . . She had actually been them – she had felt

every emotion, every horror, every hurt . . . It felt so real, so, so real.

She understood now why the two boys acted as they did. Why Ron faked - why Harry froze. She was full of so much of their suffering. It pierced through her body like a physical wound, and it ached. Why couldn't she forget? She had never wanted something so much – with every breath, every thought and every fibre of her being.

Harry whimpered not far from her. She closed her eyes to cut off her tears' path down her soaked cheeks. She had to be strong, for her two friends - for her two bonded. Her breath was heavy and laboured as she dragged herself to where they were. It took every ounce of her strength to pull Ron to Harry in a half-crawl.

She put a hand on their foreheads – they were burning up, as she was. She smiled at them proudly – they had been through so much and yet, were still there for each other. She remembered Ron's embarrassed expression when he had tried to sneak a small present onto her bed before she had gotten out of the shower – to cheer her up one day. It had had a little flower too.

Her gaze turned to the black-haired boy in her arms. She remembered Harry patiently listening to her wild theories about ritual magic as he had cleaned and bandaged up her bloody hand after a potion incident. She loved it when he had blushed after she had kissed his cheek in thanks.

Hermione reached out and stroked the limp black hair gently – trying to smother the sharp pain in her chest as flashes of what she had seen in his mind came forth. All the pain that Voldemort reaped unto him, to them – to all those people . . . the burning fire of rage in her stomach rose harshly, painfully.

I will kill him, she thought over and over as she rocked back and forth.

'Mione?' she heard a small voice call out. The girl saw Ron's vague, shaking shape sit up through the thick haze.

'Ugh . . . I feel like I've been hit with way too many Crucios,' he croaked, nearly collapsing in his position. It hurt Hermione to see him so weak. 'Damn, why did it have this kind of reaction? Was it because of the lack of blood component?'

'Maybe because we adjusted the ritual for three instead of two . . .'

Hermione gave a bitter laugh, 'I don't know, Ron. I really don't know.'

They sat in silence, exhausted magically and mentally.

'Has Harry woken up?' Ron asked - lying on his back again. The girl could see blood trickling down the side of his face and out the corner of his mouth.

Hermione shook her head – the heaviness swung belatedly behind her movements and disorientated her for a moment. It had been a long time since she had felt this mind-numbingly tired . . . not since the war. That thought brought the severity of their situation back to her.

She turned sharply to the red-head – cursing the dizziness that commenced. 'Why are you so calm about what you saw?'

'I'm holding back the reactions to them with mind magics,' he murmured, wide blue eyes staring unseeingly at the ceiling. 'We made quite a lot of mess, yeah . . .' he commented absently and dryly.

Hermione blinked, trying to command her mind to stop thinking so sluggishly. She stared at her friend, noting his sweat-drenched body, the droplets sliding down his cheeks and how his hair was matted with blood, sweat and dust. They all probably looked similar she mused.

'I only managed to do that half-way through . . .' the one-eyed girl whispered, feeling sick. 'We have to deal with it though – very soon as well.'

'I know . . .' Ron replied, 'But we're too vulnerable now and we can't incapacitate ourselves further. We could be found.'

Hermione started at this. She dragged her senses to the surface again with a gasp and searched the room with a trickle of magic left in her. Cold fear stabbed her.

'Shit, fuck!' she cursed, mustering as much venom as she could.

'What?'

'Mr Orexis' magical signature is here,' she said, 'He knows.'

Ron struggled to his knees with a groan. 'What happened to the wards?'

'They're gone. Probably the result of the backlash of magic,' Hermione said fast, shaking Harry's shoulders urgently. 'Get up, get up, Harry!'

The boy stayed limp in her arms. She could hear running in the halls above. Why hadn't she noticed it before?

'Fuck, fuckity fuck,' Hermione said, feeling the adrenaline pump in her body – giving her energy. 'Ron, get the trunk. Get the wands.'

The red-headed boy nodded unsteadily and stumbled away, towards the connecting room. Hermione tried to wake Harry up, but to no avail. The footfalls were getting louder, closer. Her heart beat against her breast hard.

She needed Harry to move, to get up so they could run. They couldn't do it without him – they were too weak at the moment. Harry was always the strongest.

Harry, get the fuck up now!

A moan. Hermione's eye widened.

Listen to me! Get up! She shouted in her mind, ignoring the piercing headache that suddenly appeared.

Green eyes opened to look up at her in shock. 'What the fuck was that . . .?'

'I don't know, but we don't have time. Orexis found out.'

Harry tensed, then cursed. He rolled into a sitting position and nearly fell over when he tried to get to his feet. Hermione tried to follow his actions but her body felt like wood – so much so, Harry had to pull her up and let her lean against his shaking frame.

'I feel like I'm going to faint,' she croaked, stumbling – hating that she admitted such a weakness. They managed to get half-way across the room, around crumbling, broken stone blocks and debris when the door was slammed open.

The two children froze when Durand strode over to them with a look of intense anger. 'Take this and get out of my house,' he spat as he thrust an old boot into their hands, 'Because of your foolishness the Ministry is going to storm my home.'

'How can we trust you?' Harry demanded, with a fierce look.

'Do you want to be dead?' Durand said coldly, 'They'll kill you on sight for casting that blood ritual.' He scowled at them, 'Go, I'll deal with the imbeciles.'

They nodded and rushed out of the room to find Ron dragging a large, leather suitcase behind him. 'What's happening?' he mumbled in a daze.

'Portkey,' Hermione said, holding out the boot so they all could touch it. The boys grabbed it and they all felt a hook on their navel and everything started spinning out of control.

Ooo

Daniel was not happy. His head felt like it was going to split open at any moment.

Briefly, he wondered how he had managed to be knocked out, tied to a chair and get a pair of socks stuffed in mouth – all in his very house. He had been innocently watching the telly while waiting for his mother to finish cooking supper when . . .

Wait! Mum! What happened to mum?!

Daniel felt dread drip slowly, tantalizingly down his body. There were people in his home. They had hurt him . . . so what had they done to his mother? Was she all right? Have they hurt her? Did they . . . rape her?

Oh god, please don't let it be so . . . Please . . .

Before his mind could make up more terrifying scenarios – he heard voices from the other room, the kitchen, perhaps? He didn't know . . . all he could feel was the raw fear and adrenaline pumping in his body. He was shaking.

'Fucking hell . . . I'm never taking a bleeding portkey again! I can't friggin' get the vomit out of my stupid hair!' Daniel heard a slightly high-pitched voice exclaim angrily. A woman?

The adolescent boy was confused. Portkey? Was that a drug or something? He shuddered

'Oi, what's that look for, eh?' the same voice asked, more haughtily than before.

'I'm just bemoaning the fact that your English has gone to pot. All our hard work put to waste . . .' replied an exasperated voice, just as high and young as the one before.

Daniel frowned. What the hell was going on?

'I can bloody well swear when I'm angry.'

'You know, I want to curse John's grave now.'

'What? John isn't dead, you fool.'

'He will be if you carry swearing like he taught you to, the bastard. . .'

'Okay, guys – just cut it out, yeah?' another lower voice interrupted, sounding a bit disgruntled and kind of pleading in a way. 'Can't you go check up on the muggles, 'Mione?'

There was a bout of silence and Daniel tensed, senses on high alert. Muggles? What were those? He heard soft feet padding across the room, then saw a silhouette of a small shape. The figure moved out of the piercing moonlight and into the shadows. The teenager froze in shock.

A girl?

A small child stood completely naked before him, with long bushy hair on her head. When Daniel's gaze rose to her eyes, he found that one was completely white – blind.

He would've gasped if there wasn't a particularly stinky pair of socks in his mouth. The sound that came out was barely a pathetic gurgle.

'Oh, you're awake already?' she girl said, taking a step forward. She put a hand on her hip and leant close to his face. 'Your thick skull must've taken most of the blow, sadly . . .' She gave him a feral grin, 'Do you want me to remedy that, eh?'

'Hermione, stop terrifying the muggle,' a calm, smooth voice murmured. Daniel's eyes flew to the figure leaning against the wall, with their arms crossed. It was a . . . child? What the hell was going on?

The boy's eyes were an intense green and he stared the girl down.

'Whatever,' the girl huffed after a moment, turning away from Daniel, 'I'm going to get clean.'

She disappeared into the shadows and Daniel heard her soft, paced footsteps on the stairs. The teenager turned just when a small red-headed boy poked his head out from the kitchen.

'Jesus, she's cranky when she hasn't had a shower . . .' the boy said as he walked into the room, dabbing a wound on his arm lightly with a bloody dishcloth, one that Daniel recognised – his mother's favourite. The teenager found himself wondering what had happened to them . . . They were filthy, dusty and bloody – even had wounds . . . Did the gangs have a fight nearby? But that wouldn't explain why they were naked.

'Have you found any bandages yet?' the green-eyed boy asked quietly, watching the other clean the wound.

'Nah, nothing so far. It's a pity our bodies can't handle doing medi-magic yet.'

Magic? He was in the clutches of deranged, drug-ridden kids?

Oh, god . . .

'Our innate magic lets our bodies heal faster than muggles,' the black-haired boy replied.

'It still hurts like a bitch though . . .' the red-head sighed, then turned and went into the kitchen.

Daniel swirled his tongue about as much as the socks would allow - trying to push it out. After a few minutes, a few attempts and gagging, the pair of socks finally budged, thank god. Progress! He looked up at the boy – at least the crazy girl wasn't there. The boy looked saner than the rest. Maybe he could talk sense to him . . .

Ah-ha!

The socks loosened and he spat them out. Daniel would've whooped in joy if the child hadn't turned and froze him with his piercing emerald eyes. Scrap that earlier thought – the boy was the freakiest of the lot! That look . . . he was dangerous . . .

Still . . . I have to find out about mum! Daniel told himself in hopes of getting a little strength from that thought.

'Where's my mum?' the adolescent demanded in a rush, feeling the sweat drip down the side of his face and he shook under his gaze. The boy did not answer, just merely stared unnervingly at him.

'Tell me where she is, or I'll . . . I'll-' Daniel immediately regretted starting to threaten his captor. He was in no position to do so.

'Or you'll what?' the boy said softly, coldly as he stepped closer.

Oh hell, he had to know where his mother was . . . Help - that was what he needed!

Daniel parted his lips, 'Hel-' but was cut off when a hand covered mouth swiftly.

'You make one sound and I'll break your fingers,' the boy hissed into his ear, his free hand twisting his index finger back painfully. Daniel whimpered.

'Understand?'

Daniel nodded.

The black-haired boy stood back, just as the girl, the one they called Hermione, slipped down the stairs. The teenager blinked stupidly – the girl was clean and sparkled. She was wearing one of Daniel's t-shirts, which was so big that it reached her knees and elbows, and one of his mother's shorts. Her frame was so small, that she needed a belt to keep the piece of clothing barely dangling on her childish hips. She was holding a pile of similar clothes and a few . . . toiletries?

'The muggle woman has amazing taste in shampoo,' she told the boy, a bright light in her eye, 'I just have to take them, Harry.'

The black-haired boy rolled his eyes at her, 'Can I have some clothes, please? It's a little cold here, not to mention breezy.'

Hermione sniggered and gave him the clothing.

'Aren't you going to have a shower?' she asked archly, watching him pull the top over his head.

'No, dishwashing liquid is my preferred type, of course,' the boy said sarcastically, pulling the belt tight.

The girl laughed, 'Evidently, Mr Potter.'

Daniel's head rose at this. He now knew one of this tormentors' name! Harry... Potter. A very bland and common name, it could be a fake in fact . . . Daniel stopped himself from sighing. Was he ever going to win?

'I'm going to give Ron the clothes,' the girl said, practically skipping away. Daniel blinked. The girl couldn't be the same one as the one before, surely . . . A shower made that much of a difference?

A footfall sounded, and Daniel saw the boy, who the girl had called Harry, slid up against the window and peered out – one hand on the curtains and the other brushing his hair back. Daniel saw a flash of a deep scar on the boy's forehead.

A lightning bolt?

The boy's expression was wary, almost apprehensive.

Daniel looked down at his hands, which were tied to the arms of a chair and tried to ignore the dull throb of his finger. The boy had not been joking when he said he would hurt him . . . it was almost as if he had done it before. The teenager shook his head – they were all so young . . . what was the world coming to?

'Harry! He's in the drive-way!' the girl shouted from a few rooms away – startling both Daniel and Harry out of their thoughts. Wild black hair whipped past him, a silent blur, and into the connecting room. What would be so important that they would leave their hostage?

What if Dad is here?

Daniel felt a flicker of hope.

But it quickly died when he realised that his father was in Scotland with his new wife and two children – a little far from the suburbs of London to help. Positive thoughts just didn't suffice at that moment. Daniel felt resigned to whatever fate that was dealt to him.

'In Merlin's name, you three were fools! How could you believe that the Ministry were not going to find out? They barely believed the story I sucked out of my thumb! They were ready to arrest me and throw me into Azkaban right there and then,' a man growled – the anger in his voice made Daniel shiver involuntarily.

Ministry? Of what?

'If you were going to delve into those practices, you should've learnt first how to hide that fact properly!' the man exclaimed and Daniel heard a fist slam down on a table.

'We are not fools,' Harry said quietly.

The man snorted.

'You know more about rituals than we do,' the crazy girl said, her voice rising in strength. 'You know how they are unpredictable they can be.'

'But that does not excuse the fact you did not consult me about your practices! You performed them in my very house!'

'You of all people should know why, Mr Orexis,' said a voice, which could only be the red-head. 'We are people who like their privacy – and the fact that their business is their own.'

'I can hand you over,' the man spat out, 'You all reek of dark magic and the Ministry wouldn't hesitate to kill you on sight.'

Oh great, the man is also insane . . . they must all come from the

same asylum.

'Don't think to threaten us, sir. Do you think we have been blind these past months? All those underhanded deals, those suspicious wizards slipping into the store, the strange substances you've refused to let us brew or test?' Harry murmured coldly. 'Do not underestimate us because we are young.'

'We can bring you down easily,' the girl hissed, 'I mean, who would take the word of a suspected Death-Eater over a few poor children? Some well placed lies and a memory charm or two can smooth it along as well . . . get our drift?'

There was a strained, near painful silence.

'What is it that you want?' the low voice of the man asked tightly.

'We want things to carry on as usual. You stay out of our business and we'll do the same. We won't tell if you won't. Maybe we can make a few deals perhaps. . .' the girl continued. 'What do you think, guys? Wanna help this dear old chap scrape a few galleons?'

There were a number of sniggers

'I like it. So how about becoming partners in crime, Mr Orexis?' the red-head asked, sounding highly amused. 'You've seen our skills in potions and how creative Hermione can be . . . a few drugs can't be that hard, can it?'

Daniel started at this. Drugs?! There were making deals about drugs in his house . . . this was getting out of hand – too dangerous!

'I can-' the man started, only to be cut off by the red-head.

'And don't think to kill us, sir. The Ministry are certainly watching the levels of magic quite carefully since our 'foolishness', as you put it,'

the boy said cheerfully.

Silence reigned again, till the man gave a small sigh.

'So you agree?' Harry asked, his young voice level.

'I do,' the man whispered and there was a few clattering footsteps on the kitchen tiles.

'So?' the girl sounded far too smug.

'Do not enter the Alley for a few days – as everything is being watched. Even the muggle entrances. I'll contact you when it's safe. For both our sakes,' the man replied emotionlessly. 'Does that let me have your silence for the time being?'

'Why, yes, dear sir. Nice doing business with you,' the girl said haughtily and laughter sounded like it was on the tip of her tongue.

The tension from the other room had lessened, but for Daniel it had heightened. There were drug dealers in his house, striking up deals – passing about threats as if they were playing a game. Three of them were kids too! It just seemed so wrong to the teenager . . .

'Deal with the muggles,' the deep voice of the man stated, then a door slammed closed. Daniel couldn't breathe – wasn't he a 'muggle'?

Three sets of feet padded silently towards and into the room he was tied up in. The adolescent had never felt so helpless as he stared terrified, into the eyes of those three children before him. They looked ridiculous in the over-sized clothes – but their eyes . . . they were the true windows into their souls, their power, their intentions . . .

The girl lounged against the arm of the couch, fingering the side of a

large butcher knife as she tilted it to see the moonlight bounce off it. She had a small smile on her lips – an almost loving leer, one which made Daniel's skin crawl.

'How about we make sure he'll stay quiet, eh?' Hermione asked, her eye falling onto the teenager. Her hold on the knife tightened.

Harry raised an eyebrow, 'You're still pissed off?'

'Oh yeah,' she said, tossing her head of curls over a shoulder.

'How about we accommodate our dear lady?' the red-head proposed, giving a mock, pompous bow. The black-haired chuckled, uncrossing his arms.

'One moment,' he said, standing up in front of Daniel, stopping Hermione from advancing. Daniel was very close to pissing himself from fear – he didn't know what to do with himself! The uncontrollable shaking affected every inch of his body.

I'm going to be killed! Murdered!

Harry lifted a slender piece of wood to his face and murmured the words, 'Oblivate.'

Daniel's vision became a blur, and he fell unconscious.

A few days later, the teenager would wonder how he had gotten the word 'dickwad' carved into his forehead – but he couldn't remember a thing.

Ooo

Author's Notes: Ron's sense of humour, eh? :D He doesn't like muggles, or people for that matter – he only sees them as tools. :) go sadistic weasley!

I found it really hard to finished the end of this chapter, so I just cut it off :(that's why I took so long . . . but enjoy! The good stuff is going to happen in the next chapter – lots of action.

Chapter 7 – You Don't Have It In You

Hoots and the drone of traffic, and the overall din of the streets penetrated the relative calm of the empty, dirty alleyway that the trio stood in. It was nearing late afternoon, and the shadows that they had hidden in were dark enough to take them from view. Plastic packets stumbled down the concrete drains with the small wind that had picked up not long ago.

Harry leant against the coarse brick wall with his arms crossed and half a cigarette between two fingers. He tilted his head upwards, parting his lips to let grey smoke languidly escape. Half-open, green eyes watched the twisting smoke in an almost bored way, tapping his foot to no beat in particular.

After a few moments, he tossed the stub to the ground – crushing it under the heel of his muddy sneakers.

'I don't see what muggles like in those . . .' he said with slight disdain, nudging the stub with the tip of his shoes, 'A good feeling for a little while, then a horrible heaviness in the lungs for ages afterwards.'

'If you have a few more, mate, it becomes an addiction,' Ron murmured in reply, watching as his friend threw the box of cigarettes with distaste to the ground.

'We could create something far greater, I'd say,' he said slightly absently, as he stuffed his hands into his jeans pockets and turned his gaze to the entrance of the alleyway expectantly. He scowled from within his hood, black strands falling over his eyes.

'What's taking them so long?' a bushy-haired girl asked from her lazy position on the fire escape above. She sounded annoyed and impatient – which was never a good thing for who she vented it on.

'Taking their sweet fucking time, that's what,' Ron answered angrily,

kicking a trash-can hard enough to dent it, 'Like they have all the time in the bloody world . . .'

'We'll make them pay more, don't worry,' Harry said, grinning. His fingers grazed over the bulge in his inner hoodie pocket.

The black-haired boy stared at his red-headed friend, noting that his anger had loosened his control. They couldn't alert the Ministry – let alone here, and to what they were about to do.

Harry hissed, 'Ron, control your magic, you fool.'

Ron turned sharply and glared – but his magic was masked immediately.

Ever since the ritual they had performed to bind themselves together a few weeks before – their magic had been different from every other wizard or witch they had come across. To divert attention from this fact, they had learned how to suppress their magic to a great extent – to the normal level of magic of one their age – and ultimately, to fool their enemies. Through this, the bond was at its minimal state and unnoticeable. But it took a lot of effort and control, which they had to do almost constantly – not to mention tiring.

Loud footsteps approached, prompting Ron and Hermione to pull their hood up to hide their faces. The girl slid off the escape, drawing herself to Harry's side while Ron did the same.

A young man walked briskly into the alley, heading towards the trio with a self-important air. Hermione immediately disliked him; from his perfectly cut blond hair to his shiny, sensible shoes. He seemed all together too clean.

As he drew close, he was frowning at the three children and trying to hide the fact he was nervous by gripping the edge of his jacket top tightly.

'Oi, brats, scat!' he said to them, motioning with his hands. He glared at them for good measure. 'Go play somewhere else.'

Harry pushed himself off the wall and strode forward, only his toothy grin visible to the man because of the shadows and hair.

'Don't be so quick to assume, boy,' Harry murmured, 'You don't want to lose your supplier do you, eh?'

The man paled, but looked confused. 'But you're kids . . .'

'The supplier sends us in his stead,' Ron cut in, placing a cigarette on his lips, cupping a hand around the flame of his lighter. He blew out a cloud of smoke into the air, sneering at the blond man.

'So, hand over the money and we'll give you what you want,' Hermione supplied with a smirk, liking how they had made the man uncomfortable. With adults lording all over them most of the time – it was good to see that they still had some power.

The man nodded and dug around in his pocket, drawing out a pouch. He tossed it over confidently to them – placing a hand on his hip as he waited expectantly.

Harry drew out the see-through bag out of his hoodie, staring at the white power within before turning his gaze to the man. The drug was an adjusted version of cocaine, happily concocted by Hermione one day and had turned out to be quite a hit in the muggle circles. It was in high demand.

Harry poured the wizarding coins out of the pouch and onto his palm – lovingly caressing them. He savoured the feel of them with each coin he counted – adding up what the man had given them. Once he was done he placed the coins back, looking up at the man emotionlessly.

He took a step forward, 'Did you think to cheat us?' he asked coldly. 'Half of these coins are fake.'

The man's smile disappeared when Harry's eyes fell onto his and stumbled back a few steps. He raised his hands shakily, 'No, they're'

'Don't lie to me,' Harry murmured, 'because I will know, squib.'

Sweat trickled down the side of the young man's face as his eyes rapidly darted back from one of Harry's eyes to the other.

He froze when Harry lifted his wand up, 'I can easily kill you for crossing us.'

'Th-th-the re-rest i-i-is in m-m-my wa-wa-wallet,' he rushed out, jerkily pointing at his pocket. He stiffened when Hermione strode towards him and whipped out his wallet, gathering all the money out of it, more than what he owed. The young man seemed like he was about to protest, but after an uneasy glance at Harry's wand, did he reconsider.

'Nice doing business with you,' Hermione cheerfully said, plucking the bag out of Harry's hand and placed it in the man's grasp. Clattering, fast footfalls sounded in the alley as the man turned and ran away from them, at a surprising speed.

Harry sighed as he lowered his wand and proceeded to stow it away in his pocket. He did not like it that he had to follow these power-plays, as it reminded him of what Voldemort had done to his followers. But threats and shows of power were the only way of making a name and reputation in the underground circles. After the meeting with the man, few would cross them as he had done. People knew not to anger the messengers of the Maker – Mr Orexis' cover-up name.

Hermione was chuckling, staring after the man. She turned, pulling her hood down and as she spoke, she brushed a curl behind her ear. 'Come, let's get going. John's waiting for us.'

Ron and Harry nodded, walking fast to catch up to her.

Ooo

Laughter, shouts and talking assaulted their ears as they crept into the crumbling, underground parking lot of an abandon building. Between pillars, hung lines of clothes to dry and semi-permanent walls were propped up by scrap wood and zinc. Scruffy, dirty children of different ages were spotted around the area, but most were huddling around the crackling fires of the tin bins as it was rapidly getting cold after sunset.

Harry glanced around, not sure how he felt. So many things had happened in these walls – a whole part of their lives that they forgot at times. The gang had formed here; he had met Ron and Hermione at that very spot . . . it was strange to walk the floor he had so many times before, not long ago, but felt like a life-time in-between.

They swiftly passed the huddled groups, hoods pulled up and faces in shadow as to not catch attention – their reputation was not that pleasant, as Hermione had let her temper go uncontrolled and got into bloody fights with the older boys in the gang in those days. More often than not, Harry and Ron had to drag her away, defeated or victorious, but always sporting a new wound or bruise as a trophy. She clung on tooth and nail, sometimes scaring the shit out of her opponents, much to her friend's amusement and exasperation.

Hermione's viciousness was one of the many factors why they had left the gang to go solo on the streets.

Harry glanced at her – due to the ritual they had performed to bind themselves together, the unexpected side-effect of seeing

each-other's memories had revealed and cleared much between them. Harry could understand why his friends did as they did - what shaped them into what they were beside him. He understood why Hermione got that little smile, like she had now, when she rode the feeling of power and terrified respect she got and invoked. It was addictive, but they all knew where that got Voldemort, so she was slowly learning how to control it with their help.

An underlying current emotion trickled into him – filled with triumph and a little frustration. Apparently it was quite common for bonds to let the emotions of its participants be shared to a certain degree, so through that the dark-haired boy knew Hermione was thinking of the fights she had won and even the ones lost. Even if she had been defeated at times, the girl was proud of the scars she gained, knowing she had tried her utmost best and that she was going to do better.

A smile tugged at Harry's lips. Sometimes he felt this ridiculous sense of pride when he thought about his bonded – how much they had been through and the fact they were still with him, standing tall and strong.

'Harry?' Hermione murmured, nudging him softly. He blinked and a smile crept onto his face, making her raise an eyebrow. The boy ignored her expectant eye and quickened his pace – heading towards the ramp to the second floor of the parking lot.

As they strode up the incline, the moonlight illuminated their presence to a young man leaning against a nearby concrete pillar. He lazily stared at them, his light hair lank and uneven as it fell across his bored hazel eyes.

Hermione grinned, a tad feral, and waved. 'Oi, John!'

The man grimaced, bringing a hand to his ear, 'Shuddup, I've got a hangover, you brat.'

The bushy-haired girl's grin widened even more and said, 'No point in asking how you've been, eh?'

He gave her a look that clearly said 'don't you dare.'

John flicked his fringe away from his eyes and turned his gaze to the two boys at her side. 'So, you're actually back . . . missed us?'

John was the leader of the gang was the oldest of them all. He had picked them off the streets and gave them a vague home, one they could always come back to – for which they were all grateful. He was connected and had friends in nearly every gang in town, with pawn brokers and shop-owners that bought stolen goods that the children of the gang 'collected.'

'Yeah, kind of,' Ron said, the corner of his mouth curling upwards.

'Come on, John. You know why we're here,' Harry interjected, glancing at the rising moon.

'Aww, so no time to reminisce with an old buddy?' John asked, with an amused tone.

'Whoa, pal, when did you learn such a long, confusing word?' Hermione murmured in a loud whisper, her hand up to her mouth for good measure.

'Had to, since my walking dictionary disappeared,' John answered back, dodging a playful swat from the girl with a grin. Ron and Harry chuckled at their antics – Hermione had always been the one that got on the best with their former leader.

John jumped out of Hermione's range and said with a sudden seriousness, 'So, you guys are really digging yourselves a hole, ain't yeah? Being in the circles is bad enough, but going to this guy . . .'

'We know what we're doing,' Ron said, peering emotionlessly at the young man, 'We know the consequences.'

'I know that, but this guy will just laugh in your faces,' John huffed and looked frustrated. 'It's just that you guys are so little -'

'We are very aware of that, John,' Hermione cut in with slight coldness, 'We are painfully aware of our ages every second. No need to remind us.'

'We are not of the gang anymore, so you don't have to be concerned,' Harry said, knowing that John couldn't do that – it was always his kindness that got the better of him. 'You may be a friend of ours, but let us be.'

John stared despondently at them, not sure how to feel. He felt a great joy that Harry had finally said that he was his friend, even though he probably said it to make him go away, but they were putting themselves in danger. He wanted to keep them safe, but he would probably get a black eye or two if he tried. He sighed and handed Harry a folded piece of paper.

'The directions in there,' John murmured, returning his hand to his jean pocket. 'Burn it once you've memorised it.'

They nodded in thanks and turned to go, but stilled when John's voice softly spoke, 'If the shit hits the fan then remember that I won't be able to help you, okay?'

Hermione's head turn and she smiled at him sadly, 'We know that, Johnny boy, there would be nothing you could do, even if you tried.'

'Wonderful vote of confidence I see,' he said sarcastically as he crossed his arms, trying to hide the tears welling up in his eyes with blond hair.

'Always, leader,' Hermione said and gave a mock salute.

'You brat, off with you,' John mumbled, unsuccessfully attempting not to rub his eyes clear without them noticing.

'Bye,' they chorused, stepping away, down the ramp, through the parking lot and out of his life for the last time.

Ooo

Cars sped by with hoots and dull drones of their engines as Harry watched, under the traffic light which sported a bright green. They were standing in a clump of pedestrians, as patiently as they could, trying not to push the people pressed up against them away. It was drizzling slightly; the droplets yellowed by the golden street lamps and fell onto the defending umbrellas and rain-coats like lovers, caressing all they came across.

The trio didn't bother registering the pitying expressions as they stood with their thin hoodies pulled up and closed, ignoring the offers of umbrella space with indignant airs.

Once the traffic light turned red, they sped across the road, pleased to be free and glad to have their personal bubble space back. They never did too well in crowded places, due to memories of cages and such things.

The pavement was narrow and they huddled along under the meagre shelter of the trees overhead, trying not to get wetter than they were already – cursing the fact they hadn't read Common Household Charms fully and found a simple water-repellant charm. If they dried themselves, they would get wet again so there was no point.

Harry mumbled the directions to himself a few times, his teeth chattering. He peered up at the street sign with narrowed eyes and

pursed lips. The rain was getting harder and the air chillier.

'It's there guys,' he said over the rain, stopping Ron and Hermione with a hand. They turned and followed his gaze to a very non-descript building that almost looked like a warehouse. They had gone quite far out of town and there were large buildings everywhere, dissimilar to the cramped space of the heart of London.

Nervousness crept along the bond from both sides and Harry couldn't help but join them in the feeling. He gritted his teeth – they had done so much more than this, so why were they hesitating?

Then it struck him – it was one of those moments that defined your life.

They could walk away from what they were about to do, changing the course of their life, or they could go on ahead. Both were equally tempting.

Harry felt a little despair, not sure what he should choose . . . they had been so certain just a little while ago! He was torn, juggling between all the choices - so many, many choices before him.

He felt a hand gently touch his arm and looked up into Ron's blue eyes.

'I understand why we did the ritual, Harry, even if we didn't know it then,' the red-head murmured, shivering from the cold. 'We did it to solidify the trust between us.' He grinned, 'So put some trust in what we chose, okay?'

Relief and gratefulness rushed through Harry as he smiled back and nodded.

Ooo

The doorbell rang insistently and a man groaned from his position on his couch, beer in one hand and a TV remote in the other. He had tried to ignore it, but the scratchy, annoying buzz called above the noise of the television, even when he put the volume up.

Fere Asper sighed and set his beverage down on the low coffee table next to the couch. He pushed his thick, straw-like hair out of his eyes irritably and swung himself off and onto his bare feet slowly, trying to lengthen the time between getting up and answering the door. It was evening, a moderately good show was on and it was raining, so who in their right minds were out and about?

He padded softly on concrete floor, his eyes flickering to the piece of paper stuck to the phone machine that read: Remember evening meeting with potentials. He groaned and pinched the bridge of his long nose.

He hated all the hopefuls that came to him and asked for training, but none of them ever had the guts to begin with and all ended up as disappointments. Normally he wouldn't even bother with meeting them at all, but that John boy had been strangely persistent, even though he clearly didn't want Fere to agree. That alone had intrigued him, made him wonder who was pulling the strings behind the scenes and had agreed – though now he regretted it, because of the effort it would entail.

The doorbell rang again, and Fere stalked ahead, deciding to cut to the chase and turn them away at his door – minimal effort that way, most definitely. But what greeted him at his door was nothing like he had imagined or assumed – three kids?!

'Hey, I don't have any money to spare, kiddos,' Fere grumbled, half-closing the door before one of the children stopped it and let the other two in before he could stop them. He stared, frowning at their audacity, 'Oi, my house isn't a shelter!'

'We aren't beggars either,' one of the kids huffed, pulling off their hood – to reveal a head of bushy curls and one visible dark brown eye - a girl? The other two copied her actions and were in fact boys, black and red hair to boot.

'Well, that still doesn't mean you can barge into my house,' Fere continued with a glare, his hand still on the ajar door. He pointed, as if it helped.

The girl rolled her eyes and the boy with black hair brought his unnervingly blank expression to Fere's and said, 'John said you agreed to have a meeting with us.'

'No, I didn't-' Fere started but was cut off when the girl plucked the piece of paper from the phone machine and smugly waved it at his face. He sighed, reluctantly closing and locking his door.

'But I fail to see why he did not mention that you are merely children,' Fere said, his gaze turning calculating as looked from one child to the next.

'Well, I fail to see why it's a problem,' the girl replied irreverently, her arms crossing.

'I don't teach children,' Fere simply stated, with an air of finality.

'What about we prove it to you that you can,' the green-eyed boy slowly said, 'To establish the fact that we are not at all like normal children.'

Fere's brown eyes narrowed, though he couldn't deny that his interest was piqued – their stances, the silent confidence and maturity surely caught many attentions. But interest would not suffice; he needed to test them and to be sure.

'You children don't have it in you to kill,' he said, adopting a critical

and tsking kind of voice.

All three of their gazes turned ice cold, then shot to him and pinned him down. There was something in those eyes that struck him deep and hard - that he would recognize anywhere . . .

'We do,' the dark-haired boy murmured so softly that he almost hissed.

. . . they had the eyes that had seen death and survived.

'Then prove it as you suggested,' Fere replied, masking his alarm. 'I could do with a laugh.'

He hoped they would shy away at this point, most did, but he knew they wouldn't – not after he had seen the resolve in those young, yet strangely old eyes. He had to at least try.

He suppressed a sigh when they nodded as one. He motioned them to follow him up the stairway, past dusty walls and on dusty floors, to a locked room. With a twist of a key, Fere lead them into a dark, musty space where a man sat tied to a wooden chair.

Fere pointed at the man with disdain, 'Kill him.'

The dark-haired boy nodded, 'Any specifics as to how?'

The brown-eyed man shrugged disinterestedly, 'Do what you want, kiddo.'

Stepping forward, the boy grabbed the tied-up man's long hair and tugged the head back, to reveal a weathered neck with stubble growing liberally. The man tried to speak, but the thick tape across his mouth only let a muffled groan come through.

A head of messy black hair tilted and green eyes pierced Fere as he

asked, 'What did he do?'

'Does that matter?'

'To me, yes,' he answered, as something unknown flickered in the boy's wide eyes. Fere tensed and scowled at the man in the chair darkly.

'Tried to rape a friend of mine,' Fere spat out, 'And near damn succeeded, the bastard.'

Morbid fascination filled Fere as he watched the boy's eyes dimmed and emptied at his words. He whipped out a knife and swiftly slit the man's throat, not even giving him time to scream in his chair. Blood spurted and gurgled out of the deep wound, as ragged, choked breaths escaped the dying man.

Fere glanced at the other children, noticing that they didn't even bat an eyelid at the scene, nor did their expressions change. It was more than unnerving . . . but there was so much potential lurking within them. A chance he couldn't miss.

'How old are you?' he asked, careful to keep a bored tone – he couldn't have them raise their hopes just yet.

'Does that matter?' the dark-haired boy asked amused, a challenging light in his eyes. Fere couldn't stop his eyes darting to the blood splatter on the boy's cheek. He gave a small smile – oh yes, so much opportunity . . .

'To me, yes,' the man said with a chuckle.

The boy shrugged, 'We're nine.'

Fere blinked. Okay, a bit of a shock – but not a hitch in the plans he had already mustered . . .

He pushed off the wall he had been leaning on and said, 'Okay, you're in.'

He never regretted his decision.

Not once.

Ooo

Author's Note: Voila! A new chapter! :) sorry for such a long wait, but I started another fanfic called 'What else can we do?' which is (shameless advertising) fluffy and romantic, completely different in genre-wise to this story, but its also a trio one.

Woot! I have planned out the rest of this story and now know the end of it :) but if you have any suggestions and such – they are very welcome!

Chapter 7 – Proof

The misty dawn shed pale, cold light down on the street, gliding through and about languidly. Dewdrops glistened on the leaves and grass as the birds twittered among them – only stilling in their noise-making when there was three small pops.

Ron, Harry and Hermione stumbled to their feet, rubbing their heads and blinking. They had only apparated a few times before and it was still disorienting – though Durand had assured them that it wouldn't always be so. The man had taught them not long ago, so they had an escape route if any authorities found out about their drug business – he had told them that he couldn't lose both his merchandise and handy slave-like workers. Needless to say, they had not been amused – but stayed silent as they needed the ability to apparate.

They walked across the empty park, past the still swings and chattering birds, to the exit. They had found a secure apparition point a few blocks away from Fere's warehouse – far enough for them to lose anyone that could follow them before they got to Fere's.

They trudged up the roads, shivering in their hoodies and jeans – Hermione scowling, Ron yawning and Harry sighing. It was by Fere's orders that they had to arrive at his house at five o'clock in the morning, everyday, no matter what.

Harry reached the door first and rang the doorbell, glaring through black strands that fell past his nose. A disgustingly cheerful Fere Asper opened the door, smiling over a cup of coffee.

'Oh, hello,' the man said, opening the door wide. They all motioned to go forward, but stilled under Fere's sudden frown.

'Why are they here?' he asked Harry, nodding at Hermione and Ron. The dark-haired boy's eyes narrowed.

'You said you would teach us,' he said slowly.

'For you, yes,' Fere said, 'As they have not proved themselves yet.'

'You gave Harry a chance, so why not us?' Hermione asked, glaring at the man.

'We are as prepared as he,' Ron murmured stonily.

The frown still marred Fere's features, but he let them through the doorway anyway. The trio cursed the fact the man's eyes were unreadable and wondered what he was thinking – what he was planning . . .

'I suppose I did . . .' Fere muttered under his breath, 'Why do I put myself in these situations? So much effort . . .'

Hazel eyes wandered back to the three children and blinked at their stubborn stances and gazes. He sighed tiredly and motioned them to follow him down the hall, past the stairway they had gone up the day before - past the place where Harry had killed for the first time.

Harry's emotionless eyes flickered to the steps for a second, then back without change.

Clasping the indent of a large sliding metal door, Fere pulled it open to reveal a wide hall with concrete floors and walls - with corrugated iron sheets and steel making up the roof in an arch.

He strode forward, still holding his half-empty and steaming coffee cup lazily and promptly collapsed into a plastic chair. They followed him, eyes wandering the expanse with wariness and slight unease.

Slowly, their gazes fell onto the man, who was watching them intensely over his cup, thick brown hair a tumble on his head. They stared back calmly, somewhat defiantly.

'Girl, come forward,' Fere said, placing his coffee on the table beside his chair. He stood up and walked towards the middle of the area – Hermione following at distance. He turned and placed a hand on his hip.

'Kill me,' he exclaimed, opening his arms with a smirk, 'If you can.'

Hermione couldn't mask her disbelief for a moment, 'What?'

'Kill me,' he said again indifferently, 'Take my life.'

Hermione wiped off all emotion off her face and said, 'You won't be useful dead.'

'Confident, eh? Well, I don't think you have it in you, frankly.'

'You know nothing,' she hissed.

'You're hesitating. You can't take a life because you are too much of a girl to do so. Women don't have the balls to murder a person in cold blood,' Fere stated in a bored tone. He said it like it was an unchangeable fact in life.

Hermione bristled, 'Stereotyping will get you no where.'

'Well, it's proving correct,' Fere said, checking his nails, 'You still haven't moved, girl.'

The bushy-haired girl's eye flashed dangerously, 'You're trying to provoke me.'

The man tilted his head to the side, 'And succeeding.'

Silence reigned, the tension in the atmosphere was almost tangible to the two boys a little way from the man and girl.

'Why? Why should I kill you?' she asked, her dark eye not leaving him.

'Because if you were under my command, then you would have to kill whomever I order you to, no questions asked. You'd kill even your mother if I said so,' he replied slowly, the corner of his mouth curling upwards in a sly smile. 'But you're weak, so I wouldn't be bothered anyway. What's the point? Maybe I should kill you right here and now - I can because I'm strong enough to do so. Not like you.'

The moment the last word left his lips, she shot forward, jumped and punched at his face, but he dodged it by taking a step to the side. Hermione landed and spun round on one heel and kicked at the back of his knees – to which Fere jumped over. She snarled at him, lashing out again, but her hands were caught at the wrist. He gripped her small hands in one of his, pulling them up and behind her back painfully.

He grabbed her hair in a fist and tugged hard, 'Like your pretty hair, huh?' Fere pushed her to her knees with a smirk and whispered into her ear, 'See, you're weak. You're a liability to others - a typically useless bitch with a loud mouth and childish fury.'

Hermione trembled, her gut twisting in rage as he told her to give up, give up, give up . . . She gritted her teeth. The girl knew what he was doing; he was preying on her weaknesses – to see how much she could take before caving in. He doubted her resolve . . . the bastard thought she would be a defect, a weak link in their group – a crack in their defenses.

No way in fucking hell I am!

Her face closed off, became blank and strangely emotionless. Oblivious to this, the man behind her carried on goading her smugly as a detached calm filled the young girl.

Ron's smirk and the sudden relaxedness of her body were the only signals he got.

Hermione slipped one arm out of his grip with a painful twist, and grabbed one of the small daggers from his boot, too quickly for him to react as he had not preempted it. She swung the blade up, slicing off her hair, just before his fingers and her skull – thus freeing her from his grip. In his momentary shock, she managed to get out of his clutches – and left him with the remnants of her hair still in hand.

Hermione whipped round, crouched down and blade poised.

She was armed, ready and royally pissed off.

'Don't you dare patronise me,' she hissed, her one eye ablaze and intense – the remains of her hair hung around her face awkwardly, jaggedly and of varying lengths – giving her young face a sense of harshness to it.

She sped forward, her blade meeting the man's with a clash. She barely knew how to use it, only knowing a few moves due to the times John had demanded that she learn how to use a weapon on the streets for safety's sake. But what she lacked in skill and physical strength, she made up in speed.

She parried and rolled away, counter-attacking swiftly – thus slashing his thigh partly. She smirked at his surprised expression.

Hermione flicked the blade around in her palm, the tip facing downwards and placed a thumb on the rounded hilt. Raising the weapon before her face she let her gaze follow the man's stalking walk as he came towards her. Her small fingers gripped the handle tightly and she took a step, then another and another – gaining momentum as she put more energy into her leg muscles.

She waited till the very last moment and rolled to the side, just before him, then used both her arms – she slammed the dagger as hard as she could into his calf. But it missed as the hilt of Fere's blade hit her on the right side of her head – the side where she was blind.

She staggered away, after scrambling up to her feet. She felt blood trickle down the side of her face, but didn't feel the pain. She fingered the liquid with mingling shock and confusion, before snarling in the man's direction.

'Just because I'm disabled and don't have a dick doesn't mean you can underestimate me, you bastard!' she exclaimed, her free hand pointing an accusing finger at him.

The girl could barely keep the rage within her from bursting forth – blood thundered in her veins and a swelling fire burned in her chest. She was going to show him – she was going to give him some bloody proof!

The battle carried on for a time, before the man won, as expected. But Hermione was smug and triumphant – taking in the congratulating wave of emotions from her bonded at the same time. She was proud that she had put up a hell of a fight.

Sure, she was bleeding, lost a great chunk of her hair, a slight concussion and had a serious gash on her upper-arm – but the man looked like he had learned his lesson.

Very well indeed, the girl thought with a smirk.

'Fucking hellcat,' she heard him grumble as he nursed his wounded leg.

The small witch weakly sat up against the concrete wall, her wounds tended by a stoic Harry Potter, who refused to show Fere how proud he was of his friend – so he showed it through the bond. The

dark-haired boy patiently sowed up her wound after cleaning it painstakingly.

'It'll scar,' he said, frowning at his work.

Hermione grinned in answer.

'Brilliant,' she murmured, in-between breaths.

Ooo

Fere Asper sighed as he patched up his leg. The girl had been a surprise – a big, loud and growling one to be exact – nothing like he had assumed. The dark-haired one, Harry, had the silent-killing potential in him – he would be a great assassin one day. But the girl . . . she was a fighter and had to learn how to control herself if she was going to survive till she could have babies.

The man shuddered – the girl wasn't even close to getting a dose of hormones. A teenage, pre-menstrual version of her would be shit scary! Needless to say, Fere put 'anger management' as a main priority in her training.

Hazel eyes fell onto the still boy standing next to the girl and Harry – starting a little when he found cold blue eyes on him. Fere had a test planned out for the boy – but it flew out of the window when he locked gazes with him.

The red-head was different – he had an air about him that reeked of falsity. His stance, his body language and facial expression . . . if Fere wasn't trained to see all this, he would not notice anything was wrong with the child.

The boy was an actor. And a natural one at that.

With a little training . . . he would be a damn good spy. Fere shook his

head – it was too soon to agree to train the boy. He needed proof, as he could be possibly looking too much into it.

But what could he do?

Anger. He would use anger to see if the red-head could keep up his mask.

'Oi, carrot-head,' he said, hiding a wince as he stood up and a sharp pain streaked down his thigh and up his spine. 'It's your turn.'

The red-head walked forward slowly, his footsteps steady. The expression on his young face was neutral, but the slight twitch of his lower lip betrayed his nervousness. Fere bit back a smirk – the boy was like so many he knew – they gave off an air of silent strength when in fact, they didn't have any. A personal protection technique, if you will.

A sliver of pain from his wounded thigh made him remember the fact he had highly underestimated the girl too, so he decided to be wary.

A loud, almost clattering footstep heralded the boy's stop. Fere nonchalantly leant against a pillar, peering down at him over his nose. 'Scared, eh? Got a lot to match up to with them around . . .' Fere said in a low voice, jerking his head in the direction of Harry and the girl.

The boy didn't reply, though his body tensed and his fingers twitched slightly.

'After seeing a throat slit and a bloody knife fight – what are you expecting to do, huh? Can you be at their level, aren't you asking yourself? Mmm?' Fere murmured, 'A little unsure about yourself, boy?'

Something flickered in those blue eyes momentarily – making Fere smirk inside. He was getting a reaction.

'Poor boy, unsure and afraid . . . why don't you just admit you don't have it in you to kill?'

Metal of a blade glinted and before the boy could throw it at the man; he was slammed into the pillar with a hand around his throat. The red-head gave a choking noise for a moment before becoming silent, his whole body trembling.

'Just give up,' Fere whispered into his ear, 'It's easier that way. For the both of us.'

The tiny light in the boy's eyes was doused and they became dead – more-like empty. Fere was slightly alarmed at the fast transition.

'What makes you think I haven't killed before?' the red-head asked quietly. The man half-jerked back at the words and searched the boy's face for deceit.

'How old were you when you first took a life, Mr Asper?'

Fere blinked, and then schooled his expression, 'I was nearly twenty.'

'I was five,' was the toneless whisper, 'I took her by the throat, very much like you are doing right now.'

Fere's hand drew back as if it had been burned and disbelief, mingled with slight horror showed on his face. The man took a few steps backwards without even realising it.

'I strangled her to death and she smiled,' the boy carried on, his eyes hidden by red strands, 'She fucking smiled.' A small, bitter chuckle sounded in the air.

The boy took a step forward and gave the man a sardonic grin, 'Since you are so good at assuming, Mr Asper – why don't you tell

me who she was?'

Fere opened his mouth, but he found no words could leave. His mind furiously told him to answer; even though he couldn't . . . he just couldn't in the face of those eyes. He dumbly shook his head.

'She was my little sister,' the boy murmured, his eyes falling downwards, but not before Fere saw a gut-wrenching sadness sweep by in them.

'Nice . . . nice sob story, boy,' Fere managed to say, wearing a toothy grin and bearing a confidence he did not feel. The red-head stiffened and hid his face with a curtain of red hair.

'Yeah, it's friggin' amazing,' the boy said derisively – then took two steps closer, the space between them nearly non-existent. Fere blinked, wondering when the boy had moved so close without him fully realising it.

But he didn't have time to ponder it as the boy withdrew a pen-knife and stabbed the wound the girl had made earlier. In the time that Fere reached down to counter, the boy kicked out at his lower leg and the result was that the man lay flat on his back.

Fere froze when he felt a small blade at his throat and a little body on his chest. The red-head had a contorted expression, mixed with cold fury and hatred. Fere had a fleeting thought - one that asked himself why the hell did he had want to get rid of the boy's mask in the first place when something like this was underneath.

'I have the 'strength' to kill,' the boy whispered, 'I've done it before –I can do it again. Don't they say it gets easier every time, Mr Asper?' The blade pressed harder against his throat, letting a trickle of blood flow, 'Are you so eager to die now?'

Fere found himself in a precarious position. If he moved, the boy

would slit his throat; he had no doubt about it. He had many ways of dealing with situations such as these, but they would all lead to a serious endangerment of the red-head, which he could not allow.

The boy was too much of a precious toy now, in the man's mind.

'You're in,' Fere said, with an air of defeat. 'I'll train you.'

The boy straightened and looked about, his face a neutral mask once more. He jumped off the man and strode to where the other two were, pocketing his pen-knife as he went. Fere watched all this with a little giddiness inside – thinking of all the fun he would have as he molded the three into the perfect tools he had always wanted.

It would be worth the effort.

Ooo

Author's Note: sorry that this is going so slow, but things are gonna speed up! Time-gaps are gonna be longer and the trio will be going to Hogwarts soon :) personally, I can't wait to write that part . . .
–bounces up and down–

Chapter 9 – 'Secrets of the Darkest Art'

Hermione stared at her reflection in the mirror, her eye following the rise and fall of her jaggedly cut hair. Her hold on the knife in her hand tightened as she cursed the hesitation writhing within her. Her gaze darted from her hair to the knife and back again.

As she gritted her teeth, she asked herself: what's the point? She knew she would never be 'pretty' – with her hair being so bushy, her skin a sickly pale and her teeth were too large . . . also the fact she had that she had a blind eye. Scars littered her body from the experiments done to her in the war and from fights on the streets.

Anyway, why am I worrying about that?

Hermione knew she had chosen a hard and rough life. Long hair would be impractical, would get into her eye and in the way, then most likely be used against her – like the man had done before. Imagine getting blood out of long hair? She winced at the thought – that she would get blood on her hands . . . memories of dying, tortured children flooded her mind and left her breathless.

Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the knife tighter, trying to calm the shuddering of her small frame. Sometimes, she was disgusted at how much she loved the sight of blood.

Shaking her head, she rid her mind of such thoughts and concentrated on the task at hand. She reached up and sawed off the first piece of hair, then another – feeling no mercy. Once she had done, she stood back, and saw another person in the mirror.

Hermione looked smaller than before, and younger. A dark ring played under her eye, making it seem wider and stand out next to her pale skin. A deceiving air of vulnerability and frailty was around her, added with the almost pixie-like and slightly gaunt face she had. Sardonicly, she concluded that her appearance suited that of a

waif's.

Her hair was short, spiky at places and somewhat wavy at others. It was still messy, but no longer bushy as it was short enough. Her forehead was left bare and was wider than she thought – her fringe was the same length as the rest.

A little desperately, she thought of all the positives of cutting her hair. Easier to maintain, looked neater, no more brushing or frizz . . . but she couldn't help but feel the vestiges of any trace of femininity she had had went with her hair she had banished. The person staring back at her . . . was different.

Different in the sense of cruelty and harshness – someone she could hardly recognise. The person she knew she was going to turn into, no matter how slow the change.

Although trepidation filled her – she couldn't deny the pleased eagerness in her either.

Ooo

The familiar smell of old books and dust of the Orexis Library filled Harry's nostrils as he entered, a smell he would always link to many sleepless nights reading with Hermione in there – of days that felt like they would never end as they meticulously redid the calculations of the ritual over and over again. After a quick Lumos spell, he dodged and stumbled past piles of books - till he got to Hermione's impromptu study area. He lit the array of candles with a flick of his wand and sighed tiredly in the golden gloom.

A few hours ago, they had left Fere Asper's place – the only time, the man had promised ominously, that they would get off free from his future training regime. Hermione and Ron had disappeared off somewhere to have time to think – and Harry let them. As after all, they had been greatly affected by their first fight with the man. Like

Harry had been after he had killed.

Distance made the effects of the bond weaker, so Harry could barely feel their emotions. The dark-haired boy presumed they had decided to spare each other their feelings at the moment, as they were alike a hurricane. Proximity jumbled their emotions up together and it made it harder to sort through it all. It was for all of their sakes, and sanity.

But Harry found himself missing them. For the past few months, nearly a year, they had always been right there. They were inseparable, even more so that they had performed the ritual and bound themselves together. The boy found it silly that only after a few hours that he felt lonely . . . when had he become so dependant on them?

Harry shook his head – telling himself that he was thinking too much. He ignored the squirming bond as it stretched itself far more than it was used to, brushing away the feeling of emptiness that accompanied it's effort. He tried to block out the yearning for human contact, alarmed that he felt that way as he had always abhorred the idea after what had happened to him . . .

Green eyes darted to a pile of books and searched the titles in an attempt to occupy his mind, to banish those strange thoughts back to their corners. He found that he was in the section where Hermione had placed all the Dark Arts books they were to study, undertaking the job of sorting and moving as she couldn't stand the chaos underfoot – her damned cleaning spark igniting.

His eyes strayed to Secrets of the Darkest Art and he pulled it out of its stack. But as he was about to open the heavy tome, Ron walked into the room and sat down on the mattress he had pulled there for Hermione. Harry was slightly shocked that he had not realised the somewhat calm of the bond because he had been lost in his thoughts.

'The bond was getting annoying,' Ron said as a way of excuse. Harry's mouth twitched up and through the link, he knew that his friend had also felt the loss of companionship.

'It was,' Harry murmured as he caught the red apple that Ron threw in his direction. The red-head had one too and Harry could see another, for Hermione most likely, bulging in his pocket. Harry hefted the book up into his arms and took the place at Ron's side, their backs up against the desk and munching on their fruit.

Ron lifted a ginger eyebrow at the book's title, but nevertheless he agreed to read it with Harry. They sat there for a time, in the flickering candle-light, soaking up each other's company. Silence and the rustle of pages being turned were the only things to be heard.

Though they did not say anything, both knew that they had the similar feeling of incompleteness without Hermione around, knowing that - even if the bond didn't complain as it was now, or exist – she was a part of them as a whole. It had never been just two of them, but three – always three.

The two boys almost sighed in relief when they felt the bond quieten – knowing that it was heralding Hermione's presence. They looked up just as the doors to the library creaked open and a person walked in – one that they did not recognise.

Harry's hand shot to his wand and he tensed, sensing Ron doing the same. But as the figure came into the candle-light, they couldn't hold back their disbelief – it was Hermione!

Two pairs of eyes stared at her, taking the new look and loss of hair. It was strange for the boys to see the full material that covered her blind eye, all the way around till the tie at the back of her head. She gazed back at them with slight nervousness, not sure how to proceed.

Though both Ron and Harry secretly liked her hair long - her new look made them proud for they knew how it became like it had. And what it symbolised - her strength.

'You look more like a boy now,' Harry chuckled, his eyes twinkling.

'Another reason Mr Asper can't underestimate me now,' she said with a smile, 'Still, I don't know if that's a compliment or not, Mr Potter . . .'

'Take it as you will,' he replied cheekily, before dodging her swat at his head. The dark-haired boy nodded towards the empty space next to Ron and said as he tapped the book, 'Come, sit – this is interesting.'

'What is it about?' Hermione asked excitedly as she scrambled onto the mattress. She sat very close to Ron, Harry noted poignantly – they always found it easier to touch one another than he did. It would always be hard for him . . . he had too many memories that would never be fully buried.

'Not sure yet, as we haven't gotten to the main part,' Ron replied for Harry, bemused at the strange sadness emitting from his friend. 'There's an overview first.'

Ron tugged the tome out of Harry's sudden, limp grasp and pulled it across his knees so Hermione could read it too. With a small heave, he propped it up against his gangly legs at an angle.

'See properly?' he asked, his gaze flickering to the girl at his side. She nodded absently, her one eye already soaking up the words before her like a sponge Ron jokingly, half-exasperatedly sometimes swore she really was.

'Wait, didn't you guys see . . . here it says Horcruxes . . .'

Hermione murmured, then her eye went wide, 'Harry, that's-!'

The dark-haired boy froze for a moment, before following her pointing finger. That single word – Horcrux – brought about a whole blur of memories and of pain. He shook slightly, and for a split-second he forgot who and where he was in raw, absolute fear. The whirl and mess of emotions let loose by that word felt like they had been scratched open and set free with a sharp knife. With an aching terror inside, the boy curled into himself as he tried to protect himself with indifference – by feeling nothing, nothing at all.

A hand fell onto his forearm and Harry started violently and scrambled away from the touch.

'I did nothing, Master. I-I heard no-nothing!' he whimpered, his whole body quaking. His nails dug into the sides of his calves agonizingly, but he did not notice the sensation of pain.

'Harry . . . oh, Harry . . . ' he heard a soft voice whisper. Green, uncomprehending eyes rose up to two gazes – slowly returning from the memories he wished he could shed. He shook his head jerkily, wondering why his face was wet and why the skin of his legs ached.

A small hand rose to his cheeks and to his shock - he felt tears. His gaze shot down his leg in an astonished wonder and stared at the droplets of blood escaping the ten small wounds.

He had had another attack.

Harry wrapped his arms around his knees and let out a heavy breath, blinking back the threatening tears. The boy knew that it had been an inane hope that he would not be prone to those attacks like he had when the war had ended . . . Hermione and Ron had helped a lot, but it was times like these that Harry realised how much he bore on his shoulders – how much weight he could never share.

Harry ignored the ill feeling in his stomach and looked up at his anxious friends. Their expressions were that of worry – and Harry

was felt utterly and almost gut-wrenchingly grateful that there was no pity in either of their eyes or the link. They knew - just knew – that he wanted nothing to do with pity, because it was something he could never take.

And Harry knew they didn't want it either. And that is why they understood.

'It's okay, I'm fine now. Just need a minute,' Harry said, hating how his voice trembled. Their emotions were still unwavering and Harry threw them a slightly bitter smile, 'You know I'm not used to them anymore.'

Ron nodded and bit his lower lip, his eyes falling unseeingly to the book. Hermione pursed her lips, but nevertheless took her piercing gaze away from her friend. Harry saw them give each other quick, reassuring glances out of the corner of his eyes.

Harry steadied his breathing as best he could, then asked in a murmur, 'So . . . how about you r-read it to me . . .?'

Ron and Hermione wore confused frowns before narrowing their eyes.

'Harry, I don't think that would be a good plan in your-'

'I have to deal with it at some time, 'Mione,' Harry gave her a shaky smile, 'Better now, than never, don't you think?'

Stony determination shone in Harry's red-rimmed eyes. Ron stared at him for a moment, his face unreadable.

'Okay,' the red-head sighed, 'As long as you dull your emotions partly with the practices from Occlumency.'

Harry glared, but agreed with a near-steady nod of his head. It took

almost all of his will power to calm to his body and emotions with the combination of meditative breathing techniques and clearing his mind. Approval flowed through the bond and Harry cracked open his eyes.

'Alright,' the dark-haired boy said, loosening his hold on his knees and shifted into a cross-legged position on the cold floor. He still didn't feel like moving back onto the couch – his skin crawled at the thought of touch of any kind.

'A . . . a Horcrux is the word used for a physical object in which a person has concealed part of their soul,' Ron started to read, almost in a whisper. 'A soul is supposed to remain intact and whole, but to create a Horcrux, one must split their soul and hide that part of it in an object outside their body.'

Harry felt ill, like he was going to throw up at any moment. But he soldiered on, his hold on his emotions tightening.

'As a result even if one's body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged,' Ron continued and his voice strengthened. 'Splitting the soul is an act of violation, as it is against nature. It is done by performing an act of evil – the supreme act of evil. By committing murder.'

Harry's mind swam with memories, but he shoved it all away.

Hermione pulled the tome towards herself, 'Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: he would encase the torn portion in another object.'

'From the journals of Herpo the Foul – the first wizard to split his soul in two – he said, 'Existence in such a form . . . the very idea of immortality is tempting, but I warn whoever follows my path – it is not what you seek. Death would be preferable than to watch your humanity slowly drip away and let yourself fall in madness.'

'Then it proceeds to explain in detail the incantation and how to do it . . .' Hermione murmured in disgust. She threw the book away and wiped her hands on the mattress, as if its very cover would taint her skin with its contents.

They stared at the closed book as it lay on the ground, a numbness trickling through the link and affecting each other. Harry had always had a vague idea of what a Horcrux was – that there were many parts of Voldemort out there, thankfully dormant. But the soul? The very idea of splitting a soul made Harry sicker than he already felt. The fact he had been touched so violently and so intimately by a creature without a whole soul made him feel dirty . . . Voldemort was truly a monster – he wasn't human anymore. And probably hadn't been for a long time.

'Harry, do you . . . know how many he . . . he made?' Hermione whispered, her one eye wide. The dark-haired boy saw the horror in her eyes and felt it too.

'I'm not sure . . . but it was definitely more than one,' he answered, as he quelled his emotions and took a deep breath before sifting through the flashes of memories. 'He always said that seven was the most magically powerful number . . .'

They stiffened as the full consequences of those words sunk in. Harry hadn't noticed until then that his breathing had become labored again, coming out in short gasps. He calmed himself as best he could.

'He . . . mutilated his soul to that degree . . .?' Hermione said, aghast. Her hands were shaking.

'Parts of him could be anywhere . . . could be anything,' Ron murmured, his face contorting in panic and a kind of hopelessness. 'How can we fight that?'

'No,' Harry immediately said as he shook his head, 'Voldemort would never demean himself with petty objects to store a piece of his soul in. No – he liked trophies.' Harry's eyes flickered up to his bonded. 'Remember that memory of mine when I was in the Death Eater Chamber?'

Both Hermione and Ron shuddered. Harry could sense them cutting off their emotions when that particular memory rose foremost above the rest.

It had been shortly after Voldemort had given Harry the lightning bolt scar. The dark-haired boy couldn't remember much, as it had passed like a haze, but he recalled enough – the chain around his throat, the blood oozing out of his scar and bites, the jeers and taunts and the satisfied smirk upon the lips of the wizard he hated more than anything. Voldemort told all of his followers that night of how he murdered Harry's parents took their son as his slave – as his whore.

Harry touched his scar on his forehead with two fingertips.

'Voldemort would choose objects of power to create Horcruxes,' he said, forcing his hand back into his lap and away from his face - away from those memories. 'Objects that would prove his power . . . his supremacy.'

'That would make sense,' Hermione conceded with a thoughtful expression, 'But what objects would he deem so?'

A kind of pained concentration marred his young face as he tried to go deeper into his memories and hopefully find those details he missed. 'There was . . . a cup. And a . . .locket?' He shook his head again. 'I'm not sure.'

'Why do you remember those, Harry?' Hermione asked tentatively, her head tilted to the side.

'I couldn't reach them from the . . . and I wasn't allowed to touch them. He got so . . . so angry when I heard the word Horcrux,' he shivered involuntarily; 'His anger cannot be compared to anyone.'

'Do you remember what they looked like?' Ron prodded, 'We need some leads.'

'The cup was pure gold. It had the letter 'H' detailed into its side, as well as a picture of what I think was a badger.'

'And the locket?'

'Just that it looked pretty large and had an ornamental 'S' on the front,' Harry replied with a shrug. The boy trembled slightly, feeling more and more tired as the minutes dragged on. He had always had a problem with Occlumency and struggled to keep up with his two friends – and as a result, the constant use of it to clear himself of emotion wore him out considerably. And it didn't help that he had had a panic attack.

'In the book, it wasn't clear about the definition of 'objects' . . . is it only inanimate or could it be otherwise as well?' Hermione asked, her eyes darting back to the tome on the ground. 'What if . . . a person can be a Horcrux?'

Ron frowned at the book, 'How would that possibly work? Two souls in one body . . .'

'You never know with magic,' Harry said, feeling exhausted. 'Anyway, it would only be a piece of a soul, not a whole one . . .'

They fell into a tense silence – their minds reeling from what they had learned. The enormity of what they had vowed to do came crashing down upon them and they couldn't help but feel a momentary, but lasting hopelessness. What could they, three small children, do

against such a foe?

'Immortality . . . is just a farce,' Hermione said after a while, with a confidence and a bravo that she did not feel. Harry and Ron grinned along with her, knowing exactly that – but were pleased at her show of courage.

'There are always ways to kill,' she continued, sitting straighter. 'He's died once – he can die again.' A bright energy started to burn in her dark eye. 'We will just have to kill him – every single one of him – no matter how many there are.'

Reassurance spread its wings out from her and down the link between them. It was defiant, it was sure, it was ready . . . and it was them as a whole – together.

'I'm beginning to see the bright side of this development . . . ' Ron added, a small smirk creeping onto his face at their slightly incredulous and expectant faces, 'We get to kill the bastard many times over. We can even take turns!'

They all burst into laughter, so much so they held onto their sides as it hurt. It felt weird to joke about the act of murder, but it was much needed to lift the sense of unease hanging over them.

'Over and over!' they exclaimed together, before laughing again. Ron took some steadying breaths then changed his expression to that of exhilarated eagerness and waved an arm in the air, saying, 'Oh, me! Pick me first! I wanna kill him first, guys!' He fixed a stupid expression on his face. 'I raised my hand before you all, yeah!'

Harry and Hermione felt like they couldn't breathe as they laughed harder at his antics. It took a few moments before they eased off into sniggers, then chuckles and finally an amused quiet that they all liked.

Ron's blue eyes flickered to Harry, then after a moment's hesitation, he got up from his sitting position into that of a crouch.

He stretched out an arm and his palm lay upwards for Harry to take. Harry's eyes darted from Ron's face to the hand and back again.

'Come sit here with us, mate,' Ron said softly with a tender smile.

'I . . . I . . . ' Harry fumbled, unconscious of the fact he was shying away from his friend's hand bodily. But Ron did.

'Remember what I said about physical contact?' Ron asked, his hand falling back to its place on his knee.

'That I need it,' Harry replied quietly.

After they had performed the ritual, they noticed that it was slightly easier to deal with the bond and their link of emotions when they touched each other – be it holding hands, sitting or sleeping next to one another . . . Harry uneasily brushed it off as a thing of the bond and tried to rid his mind of it, but Ron was the first to talk about it. They all agreed that the physical touches were being used to solidify and affirm the bond. Ron went even as far as to say it may be that the bond sensed that physical contact was what they needed.

After that, Ron became the main, conscious instigator of the touches – rightly pointing out to his two friends (though it was mainly for Harry's sake) that it was what they needed in the long-run.

'We need to be perfect to fight Voldemort. As one – and completely and implicitly trust each other, as we can't with any others. We need to be that to fulfill our vow,' Ron had said then, 'Anything else would be a danger to our mission.'

'But we're broken,' Harry had argued dejectedly.

'Then we have to fix ourselves up as best we can.'

Harry blinked when the memory past. His green eyes flickered from the tome on the floor and then to his bonded in fast succession. The link hummed with a warmth that spread from it to his body and sent tingles down to the very tips of his toes and fingers.

Ron's hand was reaching out again patiently and both their smiles greeted his gaze. Whatever they had between them – the feelings they invoked in one another – it was something that Harry decided that Voldemort didn't and couldn't have. It defied all that was Voldemort – what he preached, what he desired and what he had achieved.

And Harry liked that thought.

Slowly, he took that hand before him.

Ooo

Author's Note: aha! Another chapter – too me agggges to finish it . . .
O.o I'm probably not going to get out the chapters of my stories as frequently as I did before as I'm moving house and a whole lotta other crap. -sigh-

Did anyone recognise the tome 'Secrets of the Darkest Art'? It actually was in the Harry Potter series – Hermione found it in Deathly Hallows, according to wikipedia O.o The extract from the book isn't actually from the book (I made that up) – I took most of it from the memory of the conversation between Slughorn and Riddle from HBP.

I'd say there are about two more chapters till they go to Hogwarts!
I've got sooo many evil things planned for that part :)

Chapter 10 - Headshot

'I want to make a few things very clear to you three,' Fere Asper said as way of greeting the next day, letting them into his abode with neither joviality nor welcome. It was clear he was not a morning person. There was a distinct lack of coffee.

He had a large gun in his arms and hefted it onto his shoulder gruffly, 'If you do not obey me – I will shoot you.'

As they followed him through the passageways and into the hall he said, 'If you tell anyone about what I teach you or about my person, without my direct permission – then I will kill you without further ado.'

'And finally,' he continued, the annoyance in his voice heightening, 'if you attempt to kill me in earnest – outside your training, for whatever reason – I will torture you till the blood gushes out of all your orifices and then kill you.'

He turned to their stony expressions and glared, 'Understand?'

They nodded.

The man threw his cigarette to the ground and crushed it under his heel with a disdainful snort.

Ooo

Ruthless. It was the only word they could apply to Fere's training. Utterly ruthless and unforgiving – there was no room for mistakes.

They learned how to use firearms straight away, in and amongst the physical training they embarked on. The entirety of Fere's warehouse was sound-proofed (the muggle way) - and the trio couldn't help but tweak a few weak wards they had layered over their teacher's home to help.

Fere had them target practice for hours each day, at different distances and speeds – always testing them. They learned how to manually care, fix and create guns under his guidance. He ran them through various weapons – how to hold them and so forth – and not stopping till they had the semblance of mastery with each.

It became clear quite quickly who were more advanced at different weapons than the others: Hermione loved shotguns; Harry preferred dual pistols and Ron was at home with a long-range sniper rifles. Their aim in regards to spell-casting improved immeasurably and just as fast as with firearms.

They fought each other and Fere in hand to hand combat daily – strengthening their small bodies in the process. But such fights were not without their consequences as Fere caught on remarkably quickly as to how fast they healed. He said nothing, nor queried the fact, but just monopolised it in an abusing way. And also that they would never give up. Blood, sweat, pain – nothing stopped them. It was evident that Fere was more than a little disturbed that they never once cried, but it soon became a reluctant respect and exasperation.

In the one of the many fights between Fere and Hermione – be it within anger or instruction – the man broke the girl's right arm. Afterwards, Fere demanded that they learn how to use both arms for every task. He would not let his 'tools' be useless, nor have that weakness. After a few months of attempting to gain perfection with both arms, they were deemed satisfactorily ambidextrous. Even though they had this advantage, they all preferred their dominate right hands.

Slowly, Fere domineered nearly every part of their lives. He set out a diet for them; he planned out their daily exercises and even made timetables. It baffled the children – no adult had ever in their memory put so much effort and time into them – and sometimes they felt smothered. But they endured it, as they had never learnt as fast as

they did then.

A large part of what they learnt under Fere was to act – a part of their training that Ron flourished in. Fere seemed surprised that Hermione and Harry knew of Ron's almost constant mask, but then again the man knew nothing of the bond the trio shared. They learned different accents, so they wouldn't be identified if they were heard as well as different languages. They caught on quickly, with the help of Occlumency, as to how to hide emotion on their faces and how to manipulate their body language.

The man taught them how to read people, how to spot those tiny little details lurking beneath the surface and how to use them to their advantage. Humans, the trio slowly started regarding them as in their minds, were objects that they could control. And they found it easy to do so.

The art of lying was revealed to them, and the knowledge as to how to fool the muggle lie detectors as well. The three children found out quickly that without the help of magic, they could not lie to their teacher – which, to the man's amusement, frustrated the hell out of them. They knew that it was futile to lie to one another when they could feel every emotion through the bond – and that was the reason they put it in place, as they needed to trust one another, no matter what.

The fragility of the human body astounded the trio more than they thought it would as they studied anatomy. Under Fere tutelage, they learned how the human body worked and where all the vital points were – where a person could die instantly or slowly - and the different points where certain nerves were so they could semi-paralyse their opponents. They studied the various weapons that brought on or amplified these effects and learned what were the most useful in those regards. To Hermione's delight, Fere taught them how to see every object before them as weapons to kill and how true it was.

Fere didn't follow his 'schedule' as such, sometimes just did what he felt like and it depended on the mood he was in – be it teaching them how to pick-pocket, steal, hotwire cars, burgle or hack into computers. Once he decided to teach them how to knit and sew, much to Hermione's disgust and bewilderment (to add insult to injury, she was pathetic at it). One evening, the man ordered them to cook him supper (he did notice the poison Hermione added to his potatoes) and then proceeded to teach them the ways of the kitchen after he saw the results. They learned meals off by heart, how to notice poisons and such things in their food – then how to mask their own toxins and use them to their advantage. Due to Durand Orexis's habit of poisoning his students when they don't perfect a potion – Harry, Ron and Hermione caught on quickly as to a) perfect the potions and b) make the antidotes as fast as possible and kept a few handy. Fere was amazed at how much they knew about poisons and refused to listen to Hermione's drawn out, not to mention gleeful, explanations of the gruesome effects they had on a person.

In the way of magic, they did not learn such a large amount as they hoped because they had no teacher, nor the time. But what little time they could spare in between potion lessons late into the night with Durand and the gruelling training during the day – they were dealing drugs, researching the war and scanning old newspapers for information of the fates of the Death Eaters. It disgusted them as to how many Death Eaters got away without as much as a restriction upon them, as many pleaded that they had been had the Imperious Curse cast upon them. Lucius Malfoy was one of the many who did so.

They knew, with a sad certainty, that they would use the Unforgivables in the near future and decided to be prepared – to cast and to withstand them. Due to their Occlumency shields, they found that throwing off the Imperious Curse to be easy. They cast the Cruciatus Curse upon one another, a task that tested their trust and ability to cut off their emotions to the maximum. Slowly, they found out that due to the fact that they had experienced the curse in the war

– they had adapted to it to a degree and built up a moderate resistance. They had help from using Occlumency, but not always as the pain became too great – although the bond aided them by sharing their pain amongst them slightly. They learnt how to show no pain or what effect the curse had on them and be utterly silent while under the Unforgivable.

Fere taught them ways of dealing with pain and his favourite was 'repairing' – which entailed beating the crap out of the children. It was strange for the man to do so, as he had never hit a child before then, but in his head he no longer considered them as 'young', not after seeing their eyes. They never complained, never said a word or attempted to fight back in those times – just acted resigned and patient. They had amazing pain-thresholds – at times, the man couldn't help but envy them for it.

Their finances were a little tight in the year and a half they trained under Fere Asper, as they were not ready to take on any jobs as of yet. Durand still demanded the drugs and potions for the shop and they worked late into the night – falling sleep exhausted, but happy that they were doing things and occupied. Much to Fere's frustration, they were damn near insomniacs. Hermione was the worst and the dark, almost yellow ring under her eye was a permanent fixture to the man's dismay. They never mentioned that they had been sleeping better for the first time in years to the older man, due to the fact they were near exhausting themselves each day in training.

But it was the then that Harry would later say was the happiest time of his life.

Ooo

'Hey, mate, can you pass the mug over here?' Ron asked, standing next to the kitchen counter, yawning as he fiddled with the coffee machine before him. The black-haired boy looked up from his book with a momentary scowl, then absently threw the aforementioned

mug to his best friend and went back to his reading.

The red head rolled his eyes at Harry's expression, but nonetheless caught the mug without looking, his body reacting with deft skill - a product of constant practice. He whipped the unsuspecting object to the machine and watched lazily as it was filled. The boy sighed when it finished and plonked himself down on a chair on the opposite side of the table from Harry.

They sat in silence, only the sounds of pages turning and Ron blowing his hot drink cool were heard. The door to their teacher's kitchen creaked open and Hermione slipped into the room. Her hair was messy, short and wet, sticking up everywhere – mirroring Harry's hair on a good day.

'Shower?' Ron asked in a murmur, his elbows resting on the table, both hands wrapped around the mug that lay just before his freckled chin. His blue eyes glanced up at her through the soft steam rising from his coffee.

The girl shrugged and sat down, 'Yeah,' she replied with a small, lazy smile, 'Had to get the blood off my arm. The wound keeps on opening and seeping.' She rested her chin in her good arm's palm.

Ron nodded, gaze flickering to the freshly bandaged limb of his bonded. More often than not, in their daily training, they would collect nasty bruises and wounds. Fere Asper left them to stitch and treat themselves, and only intervened when a limb or two could maybe fall off. They were used to looking after themselves.

Harry turned another page, utterly immersed in his reading. The red-headed boy saw a flash of the words 'nervous system' and almost snorted in amusement – Harry was fascinated by nerves. The black-haired boy with a lightning bolt scar on his forehead could paralyze a person by merely touching them in the right spot – he was, by far, the best at it out of trio.

Footsteps sounded as Fere descended the stairs and swung into the kitchen of his home. He glanced at his students, brushing a clump of thick, straw-like hair out of his face and took the last seat. His arms were crossed and he leaned back in his chair.

'I think it is time,' the man said, a grin slowly creeping onto his face. 'I've got a hit for you three.'

The children stilled - their eyes wide and filled with anticipation. It had been a year since they had approached John about contacting Fere Asper and they were eager - not that they wanted to commit murder, but that they could finally put to use what they had learnt and to show their teacher how much they had improved.

But the man had confirmed that he thought they were ready. An odd sense of pride rose up in them and was shared in the bond – making them slightly giddy. But they didn't show this, as they wiped their faces clear of emotion.

'Are you sure?' Harry asked, closing his book with a dull thud.

'I should be asking you that,' Fere said with a chuckle. Then he sobered. 'Of course I'm sure - I wouldn't bring it up if I wasn't.'

They glanced at each other, then nodded as one. They didn't notice the small shiver of the man – Fere had always thought it creepy how similar and connected they were, almost as if they were one person. They understood one another without words and the man could never figure out how no matter how hard he tried.

'Will you debrief us?' Ron asked, placing his mug of coffee on the table. 'Do you have any information and such?'

'I'm assuming you've all agreed to go through with it then,' the man said with a barely concealed smirk. He pulled an envelope out of his

jacket and tossed it onto the surface nonchalantly. He nodded towards it, 'All you need to know is in there.'

Harry took it slowly and his two bonded moved their chairs so they sat close and next to him.

'Just so you know, I'm overseeing this task,' Fere said, getting out of his seat. He stopped in the doorway and looked over his shoulder at them. 'But I won't interfere. Just watching to make sure you don't get killed. I've put too much effort in you three to see you dead just yet.'

Harry lifted a dark eyebrow and pursed his lips. Fere grinned and walked out of the room, lighting a cigarette as he left.

Ooo

Hermione tightened the leather strap of her eye-patch, securing it's position around her head. She ran a hand through her hair and estimated that it must be about two inches in length, far too long in her opinion. She told herself to remember to ask Ron to cut it shorter later, as the red-head had demanded that she never touch a pair of scissors again as she had no sense of 'style' when it came to hair. She snorted in amusement at the memory as she slipped on a black beanie, successfully hiding her hair by tucking her fringe in it and freeing her face.

The girl wore a long-sleeved and turtle-necked top, as well as fitting pants. All she wore was black, even the buttons, zips and laces of her attire. Her boots were soft, to help with walking without a sound. Her gloves were fingerless. Limp around her neck was the mask she could pull up to hide half of her face at moment.

'Are you ready?' a quiet voice asked from the doorway. Hermione started slightly and turned her head to Harry – the boy had a similar outfit, though he wore a dark blue jacket over it. His hands were stuffed into the pockets and he looked bored. 'We're heading out in

ten minutes.' He threw a parcel to her, 'Here's the vest.'

Hermione made a face. 'Mr Asper knows I hate bullet-proof armor – it's so bulky and uncomfortable. My freedom of movement sucks with it on.'

Harry shrugged a shoulder, 'Well, he's not taking any chances,' Harry said then smirked, 'We all know how much you love getting shot.'

She rolled her eye heavenward, 'I think he's fond of shooting me more like.'

Harry chuckled, then turned and left, one corner of his mouth curled upwards.

The short-haired girl tugged and buckled the vest on under her top. She looked around the room – their temporary quarter within Fere's warehouse for over-night stays – and sighed, suddenly feeling weary. Her dark brown eye fell on the brown jacket on the small bed pressed up against the wall, then the belt and pistol on top of it. The girl strode over and arranged the dark belt on her small hips, the gun holster brushing against her thigh.

She grabbed her knife and sheathed it alongside her firearm. She liked the weight of the weapons – they reassured her, and was solid in their reliability.

As she pulled on the brown jacket, she stared at her pistol. Tonight, in just a few hours, she would kill a person for the first time. She felt strangely detached and uncaring at the thought, which worried her slightly, but she smothered her uncertainties. Doubt and hesitation had no place in a fight. It was just do and feel later, or preferably not at all.

Almost mechanically, she left the room, swept down the stairs and entered the entrance hall. Ron and Harry silently stood waiting, while

Fere leant against the doorframe with a nearly empty cup of coffee.

The man was watching her with unreadable eyes, which annoyed her more than anything. She scowled at the males before her and snapped, 'Quiet staring and get your arses out of here. We've got things to do.'

Ron and Harry's expressions wavered for a few moments into small grins before all emotion left their faces. One of Fere's eyebrows rose and he gave a lazy shrug.

'All right, princess,' Fere said, then took the last gulp of his coffee and placed the mug on the phone table. 'Don't get your knickers in a twist.'

Hermione's eyes flashed and before she knew it, her pistol was in her hand and was aimed at Fere's head – right in-between his eyes. For a moment, she could clearly imagine the bullet piercing the skin, muscle, bone and the blood . . . her throat suddenly felt dry.

'I tolerate your shit normally,' she said in a dangerous, low tone, 'But I won't today. Not now.'

The man stared straight into her eyes, then turned his head to the side with a bored and unimpressed look on his face – one that Hermione could see was partially forced. 'Okay, okay. I'll leave you alone for a little while, hellcat.'

Hermione lowered her gun, 'You better.'

Ooo

The heater hummed softly next to his crossed feet; letting the warm air rise up from under the desk the middle-aged man sat working at. A small plant weakly stood in its pot on the window sill behind him, soaking up the cold light that seeped through the half-open curtains.

With an exasperated groan, the man furiously slammed his cigarette into the ash tray and ran his fingers over his balding head. He stared at the pile of documents before him with a look akin to loathing. It took all of the man's self-control to stop his arms from dumping all those pages in the bin, or better yet, the shredder in the cupboard on the other side of the room.

Instead, he crossed his arms and leant back in his wheeled chair – staring at his office before him. Even as irritated and grumpy as he was, the satisfaction of having his own and private office was great. After many years of working in cubicles and having nosy neighbours – he was filled with triumph and relief. It had been six months already, but the feeling still didn't go away.

The tiny breeze that wafted through the slightly open window ruffled the pages and his mind was brought back to reality once more. He had work to do.

But he was wrenched from his musing by the click of the door-handle of his office. The man looked up, curious, and tilted his head to the side as if that would help him see the mystery behind the door.

The wooden door swung open to reveal a small figure . . . a child? The man shook his head and blinked. Dumbly, he realised that his eyes were indeed not deceiving him – as the child waltzed up to his desk and took the chair before him with an arrogant ease that immediately angered the man.

'Hey, kid, what the hell are you doing in my office?' he demanded, shifting his horn-rimmed glasses higher up his nose with a finger. He felt the urge to light up another cigarette, but ignored it.

The child didn't answer, but hummed softly instead. The face of his intruder was hidden by a hooded brown jacket which frustrated the older man more. He pulled his chair closer to the desk and crossed

his arms once again.

'Answer my question or I'll throw you out,' he stated haughtily.

The humming stopped and the child turned. The man started, eyes widening as he took in the pale, drawn face and the covered eye. A sliver of dread curled down to his stomach at the smile that greeted him.

'No need for that, Mr Adams,' the child said blithely. 'I'm sure you've been expecting someone like me to come your way'

'I don't know what you're talking-'

'Oh come on, you seriously expected that you would live till a ripe old age after what you did? My employer certainly didn't, Jasper Adams, I can assure you.' The child gave a lazy laugh, 'I didn't think it possible to see someone so pissed!'

The man, Jasper, sat frozen to his seat. All the blood of his face seemed to fall down to his toes and he felt suddenly sick. 'Is this a joke?' he questioned in a whisper.

'Sorry to disappoint – but this isn't.'

Jasper heard the ruffle of the brown jacket and his eyes hot to the silver weapon in the child's small hand. With shaking hands, he frantically grabbed for the phone on his desk but stilled when a delicate finger cocked the pistol.

'I wouldn't if I were you,' the kid started softly, slowly, 'I have a nice friend in the opposite building with a long,' the gun flicked to the side absently with the hands of the child as it gestured, 'long, long gun. He likes using it. And did I mention it is big too? Oh, let's not forget its also pointing at your fat head.'

Jasper gulped almost audibly. All of his being was screaming at how wrong it was to have this child point a gun at him, with the intent to kill. His eyes couldn't move off the weapon in those tiny hands.

'So, how about we make a deal, Mr Adams?' the child asked, checking its nails as it said it. 'What do you think?'

The man felt a small hope spark within him. A deal? There could be a chance . . .

'Explain,' he managed to get out with much difficulty, it felt like his mouth was glued shut. It was hard to move as his body seemed only capable of shaking.

'You get to die a relatively quick and painless death if you hand over the documents that you stole.'

He frowned, a sudden protest on the tip of his tongue, 'No fucking wa-'

'And if you don't, I'll show what I'm capable of. Of how far and how much pain I can inflict on you before you die a meaningless and pathetic death. So,' the child said in an uninterested tone, 'what do you choose?'

Jasper opened and closed his mouth a few times, and tried to say something, but nothing came out. He was shaking almost uncontrollably and fear was not helping. He didn't want to die, he didn't want to die, he didn't want to die . . .

The words sounded stale, even in his own head.

Almost numbly, he gave a slight nod of his head towards the pile of papers on his desk – exactly in the same place as they had been a few minutes back, but it felt like a life-time ago that he had been surveying his office with pride. Sweet, blissful moments, he thought

ruefully.

The child inclined its head and grinned, 'Nice doing business with you, sir.'

The shot resounded in the building – the glass windows shuddered and the walls shivered. When they found Jasper Adams in his office, he had a bullet lodged in-between his eyes and was bleeding all over his shiny, new desk.

Ooo

Author's Note: aha! Another chapter at last! Thank you guys for your patience, but I was extremely busy . . . and also the fact that this chapter just refused to be written :(it took me ages! I actually don't like this chapter . . . I may change it later and stuff . . . but for now – voila! Enjoy.

Chapter 11 - Devil's Spawn

'Jesus, Thom, what the hell are you saying?' a frustrated voice asked into the gloom of the smoky bar. 'Just fucking calm down!'

'How can I when they are a-after me, Amy?' a low, fearful voice hissed harshly into the din. The man sat huddled and shaking in his coat, the collar pulled up to hide his face.

'They?' the woman questioned, her small beady eyes narrowing. 'Who the bleeding hell are you talking about, man?'

Thom's gaze sharply turned to hers, disbelief evident in his watery eyes. When he saw her expression he looked down at the table, pulling his coat closer to his body and pushed himself against the wall behind him.

'Where the fuck have you been? You have to know about those . . . murderers,' he whispered, his fists clenching tightly. 'They have been running rampant for ages.'

Amy's eyes widened, 'Do you mean . . .?'

'Yeah, the child killers. I have heard that people call them the 'Devil's Spawn' on the streets . . .'

'But no word has gone to the public, or the newspaper! I've only heard rumours by word of mouth, Thom, and I don't believe half of that stupid gibberish. I mean, how can a young child agree to kill and torture for money voluntarily?'

'But it's true. And they're after me.'

'What?!' Amy all but shrieked, and only the whoops of the fellow, drunk bar patrons drowned it. 'You bastard! What did you do?'

'I just cut a few deals a little fine and got into a . . . meagre debt,' the man said, gesturing with his hands for her to sit down and shut up. 'I had a job to do for the boss, and I messed it up bad.'

'Oh, you stupid dickhead! I told you not to offer!' she raged, hitting the wooden table with a fist, wild and thick hair flailing at the movement. 'You assured me that nothing would go wrong!'

Thom winced as he glanced at her hand. 'Amy . . .'

'Oh, no. You don't dare try that tone with me! You've got a bounty on your head, you stupid fool!'

'Please, Amy-' he started, but stopped when the woman marched off to the counter, to the bartender, with an air of indignation, fear and anger jumbled together. Her waitress uniform was dirty and crinkled – it was near the end of her ridiculously long shift. The man sighed and slugged down the end of his beer, wanting just to do something, to move – to fill up the hollowness within his belly.

After a moment's hesitation and a glance towards his distressed sister, he got up and out of his seat. With almost jerky steps, he wandered to the bathrooms. As he opened the door, the smell of rancidity and urine filled his nostrils and he grimaced – he was sure that if he breathed in too hard the bile in his stomach would rise.

The man stumbled over to one of the stalls and opened the door, then locked it behind him. His shoulder hit the divider and he slumped against it – feeling weary as the adrenaline that had fuelled him for most of the day, since the threat, ran dry.

He fiercely rubbed his eyes and sighed. Ever since the threat in the form of a letter had been delivered to him, his hands had not stopped shaking – hell, his whole body shook. He just wanted to sleep, sleep, sleep . . . but he knew not where to turn, where to go or if it was safe.

All the uncertainties were alienating him from others. And belatedly, Thom realised that it was what they wanted.

A solid, loud sound of a shotgun being cocked was heard and Thom looked up. Perched up in the windowsill above the toilet sat a small figure, an expression of self-satisfaction spread on the thin face of the child.

'Been a naughty boy, eh?' the child – a girl? – said, fingering the trigger of the shotgun. 'Thomas Berr, right?'

The man just stared, completely white-faced.

A slender, dark eyebrow rose and the girl glanced down at the weapon once before resting her gaze on him once more. The man didn't know how, but he knew exactly what would happen if he didn't answer – just by that one look.

That message and intent in that eye made his shaking return tenfold.

Absently, he realised he had shook his head from side to side so rapidly it had hurt. Denial, denial – it had to work!

'You sure?'

He nodded almost frantically.

'Really, really sure?' she teased, running a finger down the barrel of the gun.

It was like his head had a life of its own.

'Aww, such a bad liar! You know,' the child said, chuckling as she lifted her hand to eye that was covered, 'It's not nice to gorge people's eyes out, Mr Berr. It's very sore!' She readied her hands on the weapon once more, 'I'm sure your dear, dear goddaughter you

kidnapped and held hostage agrees. Poor, blind soul, she is now.'

Thom stood ram-rod straight, mouth slightly ajar and the shock in his system was barely recognised. 'How did you -?'

'Indirect confession! Thank you, sir,' the girl said with a wide grin. 'It was nice to meet you!'

The shot fired and Thom Berr painted the stall red, to one Hermione Granger's delight.

Ooo

Hermione skipped into Fere Asper's lounge, whistling a tune she couldn't name. She brightened even more when she saw her red-haired bonded sitting cross-legged on the couch. The boy held a lit cigarette in-between two fingers of the hand he let his chin rest on – he appeared to be contemplating the strangely shaped package on the coffee-table.

The witch pulled her hood down and slid her beanie off her head, throwing it carelessly onto a chair as she made her merry way to Ron.

'What's in it?' she asked as she nodded towards the package and shrugged off her jacket.

Blue eyes slid to her and blinked lazily, 'For some strange reason, the employer wanted the head.'

Hermione snorted, in apparent amusement. 'There are some sick fuckers out there . . .' she tilted her head to the side, 'How did you do it?'

'Cut it off,' he said dispassionately and rolled his eyes at her shock – gesturing towards the slim holster that lay on the underside of his

right forearm – where his wand lay. Hermione quirked an eyebrow at the use of magic and got a shrug in reply.

In the beginning, they had agreed to use as little magic as possible on the job, as it would be waste of energy as well as too easy against muggles. They had learned a many a skill under Fere's tutelage and they wanted to use every bit of it. But it was more that they didn't want to become dependant on magic to fulfil their every whim and need – like a many wizarding folk did.

With every hit, they used Legilimency on the targets to see what they had really done. All three of them had distaste with the idea of killing an innocent person – so they checked. If they were guilty, they carried on with the job – though, if not . . . they would set the person free.

But they had not yet found a person that was not guilty of some crime. This fact disillusioned them as to the nature of humankind.

Hypocrites, Hermione had started whispering in her mind as she stared at every meaningless face she passed. Liars, murderers, desecraters, hypocrites . . .

'Have you heard from Harry yet?' Ron queried, crushing his finished cigarette in his ash tray. Ever since they had started killing for money, the freckled boy had acquired the habit. Slowly, two or three cigarettes a day became an almost constant fixture.

'He said he'd be a little late,' Hermione said, setting herself down next to Ron. 'Had to chase his target for a while, apparently.'

The red-head sniggered, 'Poor bugger.'

'Which one?' the brown-haired girl chuckled.

'Tough question!' he answered with a smirk, pulling out another cigarette out of its box. With a flick of his smiley face lighter (curtsey of Fere's morbid and strange sense of humour), he lit it and took a deep drag.

They felt him arrive through the bond before he actually walked into the room. Harry tugged his beanie off, revealing the jagged, pink lightning bolt scar on his forehead. Messy black-hair sprang loose and fell over tired green eyes.

'I hate running through crowds,' Harry said and gave a soft, audible groan, 'and roof-tops.'

Ron blew out a cloud of smoke and gave a short, bark-like laugh, 'We could tell.'

Harry scowled half-heartedly at his friend and blew the vestiges of Ron's smoke away from his face that hung in the air. Suddenly, his wide eyes brightened and he asked eagerly, 'So, how many?'

Hermione grinned and held up four fingers smugly.

'Three and a half,' Ron said promptly, swirling his cigarette between his fingers.

'A half?' Harry and Hermione said in unison and with shared confused.

'I killed the intended target, but I could get a bonus if I took care of a few limbs of the hit's partner in crime. I got both legs,' the corner of his mouth curled upwards as Ron said it. 'Induced heart-attack.'

They stared at him in slight awe and he shrugged.

'What about you, mate?' Ron asked, leaning back into the couch nonchalantly. 'How many?'

'Two,' he mumbled with a frown.

'How many what?' a familiar voice said from the doorway and the trio turned to see their teacher, Fere Asper. A cup of omnipresent coffee rested in his hand and its aroma wafted into the room, pervading their sense of smell. 'What are you little bastards prattling on about far too early in the morning?'

'Its evening, sir,' Hermione chimed cheerfully and loudly purely for the man's benefit.

The older man grimaced, 'Can you keep it down?'

'It's not our fault you've got another hangover, sir. We did try to tell you that you were indulging in the red wine a little too enthusiastically last night, but you refused to listen to reason,' Ron explained, not even trying to hide the smirk on his face.

'Oh bugger off with your long fancy words, boy! Now, tell, what were you talking about?' Fere grumbled into his cup.

'A game,' Hermione said slowly, as if she was talking to a young child, 'that we are playing.'

Fere scowled at her tone, but ignored it and pressed forward, 'Which entailed . . .?'

'How many jobs we can complete in day,' Harry supplied then shrugged, 'We were bored when you were snoring deafeningly this morning.'

Fere blanched and stared at the children before him. He blinked and blinked again. 'A game . . .? Of killing people?!'

They shrugged their shoulders as one.

'Got nothing better to do. Time is money, after all!' Hermione said with a pout. Then she grinned.

Fere stared at them – like he had never seen them before - then looked down, turned around and walked out of the room. On the way, he grabbed another bottle of wine and mumbled something about 'going to bed.'

The best way to get rid of a hangover is to get drunk again, Hermione remembered their teacher telling them once and chuckled. It had become so easy to freak Fere out lately. It was almost as if the man felt guilty about teaching them all he knew and introducing them to his world – to what they considered the real world.

Ooo

Harry secured the pouch of wizarding coins in his jacket pocket and strode out onto the street, his bonded following closely behind. They left behind the goblin's shop, Rog's Transaction, and walked out into the night-life of Knockturn Alley.

As their heels clacked on the cobbled street, they stayed in the shadows as best they could – since Knockturn Alley changed for the worse after nightfall. As they were three small children, they were targeted as either easy or rich goblins because of their size. Hags, half-breeds and werewolves populated the darkness, creeping out of whatever crevices they holed up in during the day and stalked the fools that left their hearths.

The bars and clubs lit up and business commenced in the twilight – only to cease when dawn approached. Exiled or banished wizards and witches were littered everywhere – either drinking away their sorrows or, in their desperation, offering to do anything, anything for a bit of cash.

Whores were dotted along the cobbled streets, calling out to passing figures and pouting their red coloured lips in attempt to look seductive – shivering in their scantily clad clothes and high heels under the yellow light of the streetlamps.

Drugs ran raging throughout the dizzying streets, being bought and available at every corner. Dealers accosted those that walked past, hissing their offers of a good time and cajoling enticingly.

Knockturn Alley was the lowest of the low.

It was the bane of Ministry's back.

It was where power meant everything.

The black-haired boy pulled his hood up to hide his face, his green eyes like shining emerald jewels beneath. They slipped in and out of the shadows, like gliding wraiths and a demented beggar woman whimpered as they passed – images of Dementors running through her broken mind as she cowered.

The trio passed a vomiting wizard, half lying in a grimy gutter – they barely spared him a glance and left him to his painful moans. The volume of the clubs' music thudded through the air, making them wince and to Ron it felt like the very earth was shaking beneath them. Hermione gritted her teeth – she had the best hearing out of the three of them, as she was more dependant on sound because she only had one eye. She absolutely loathed the nightclubs near Durand's potion shop.

Harry's gaze jerked backwards as he felt eyes on him and saw two men watching them. He swore under his breath, upping his pace and sent a wave of wariness down the bond. Ron and Hermione looked up sharply at him, their eyes hardening as they recognised the message.

They darted down the neighbouring street, their cloaks billowing after them, and into a connecting narrow alleyway. Soon enough, the men sauntered in, wielding daggers and wands, chuckling darkly. Cut-throats and petty thieves held sway over a large part of the Alley – easily bought and hired by those with gold and influence.

'Little kids out to play, eh?' one of the men spat, lifting his wand to eye-height. 'Sorry, but you'll have to cut it short and hand over the gold.'

The other man nodded and leered at them, his dagger glinting in the moonlight. His tattered robes fluttered as he took a few steps forward.

Hermione opened the holster beneath her forearm and felt her wand slip into her grasp – unseen to the men as her jacket was big enough on her small frame. Softly, she sent off two weak Stunning spells in fast succession.

The men staggered and fell to their knees with dual gasps of shock. Ron and Harry shot forward, grabbing and twisting their arms behind their backs painfully. The short-haired girl silenced their shrieks with a flick of her wand and she stalked forward till she was a few steps away.

Slowly, she pulled the leather covering to the side and away from her right eye. A completely white eye blinked open and quivered, before seemingly focussing on the trembling men.

'Do they have it?' Ron asked, tightening his hold on the man's wrists.

Hermione straightened and covered her eye once more, 'Only one.' She nodded towards the man at Ron's mercy, a darkness swirling in her brown eye. 'He has the Dark Mark.'

Anger bubbled beneath the red-head's emotionless demeanour.

Ron's hands coiled strongly around the man's forearm, fingernails biting into the skin.

'And him?' he almost hissed, eyes flickering to the other held down by Harry.

The girl had no emotion on her face as she stepped close to the aforementioned wizard – she leant down and sniffed the air around the cut-throat's face. 'No, he doesn't have it . . . but I can almost-' her tongue came out of her parted mouth and she licked her upper lip, '-taste the Dark Magic on him.'

She drew back and stuffed her hands into her pockets, 'You guys can deal with them. I want to watch.'

Harry quirked an eyebrow but did not comment.

Ron shoved the cut-throat to the ground ruthlessly and pulled out a long piece of wire from his belt-pouch. He put one foot on the man's lower back, pinning him down. The red-head tugged his head back by the hair and quickly whipped the wire around his neck. With both hands, he crossed the wire and pulled.

The wire cut into the man's neck, but the boy did not loosen his hold. The wizard flailed about, screaming silent screams as Hermione's spell was still in place.

Cruelty, pleasure and righteous anger flooded the bond – but they all ignored the pain that accompanied it, relishing in the moment. They all wanted to remember it – they wanted to cherish the feeling of power as they watched the life leave the Death Eater. No matter how many times they did it, it still felt amazing.

Fire burned in their veins for a long time afterwards – fuelled by memories and a promise.

Ooo

The rising sun peered over the horizon and bathed the kitchen in pale light. Slowly, Harry sipped his cup of coffee as he watched it ascend over the chimneys and rooftops of London. Smoke swirled around Ron as he held a half of a bent cigarette in-between his lips, leaning back into his chair with his feet on the table. Hermione lazily messed up her spiky hair with a hand, warming the other with the mug of tea she had before her.

No words were said, as they watched the new day begin.

Harry's green eyes were soon drawn to an approaching shadow in the distance, silhouetted by the sun. The boy's back straightened and a slight frown crept onto his young face. From the shape – there was no mistaking that it was an owl.

Hermione and Ron felt his curiosity and turned their gazes to him, silently watching his every move for an indication. He didn't look at them, but merely lifted his hand and pointed at the owl.

The black-haired boy slipped out of chair without a sound and opened the window wide. The owl grew in size as it came closer and finally landed, perching itself on the window pane. Three letters were tied to its leg.

With gentle hands, Harry took the letters out of the owl's care. He turned back to his bonded and stared for a few moments, at them, then at the yellowish envelopes in his hands. There were three identical wax seals on them, all dominated by a 'H'. Their names and address were written in emerald green.

He blinked, then handed their letters to them. They opened them and read – shock, bewilderment and disgust felt together successively.

'They want us to go to Hogwarts?' Hermione said, a wry, dark smile

widening on her face. 'To a school full of innocent children?'

Harry gave a bitter laugh, 'Apparently so.'

As he let his gaze rise up to the ceiling, he knew that these people were too late in saving them. If they couldn't themselves, then no-one could.

As if they wanted to be saved.

Revenge was too sweet.

Chapter 12 – Welcoming Feast

The scenery flashed by, in a blur of green, yellow and blue. Harry sat slumped in the leather seat, his elbow resting on the window pane and head propped up by a hand. The train rocked slightly and the clacking of the rail track filtered through the closed window and floor as they passed over them. The din of too many voices made a dull hum resound throughout the compartment – unintelligible and useless chatter. Harry scowled at the outside world.

'Come on, Harry,' Hermione sighed, standing up to reach for her bag from the racks above the seats, 'We need to change into the school uniforms.'

Harry's scowl deepened. He didn't want to be there. He never intended on going to Hogwarts. He watched as the brown-haired girl carefully pulled out three black uniforms, which were clear of any of the house colours. Harry and Ron had sat for nights on end, sewing and stitching – creating three exact copies of the Hogwarts uniform they had seen in Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. Hermione had flat out refused to wear the girls' skirt and opted for pants.

Reluctantly, Harry took the pile of clothes from his bonded. As he slipped out of his normal muggle attire, he saw Hermione frown at him out of the corner of his eye. He turned, mid-buckling up his shiny new leather belt and lifted an eyebrow, 'What's wrong?'

'The cover-up is not working, I'm afraid,' she said with a pained expression. 'It keeps on showing through.'

Harry's hand shot to his forehead and he felt for his lightning bolt scar. Sure enough, the jagged flesh still rose prominently. The dark-haired boy swore and he rubbed his eyes hard, feeling suddenly tired. All the spells they had tried had failed to hide it – so they had resorted to make-up.

He felt and saw Hermione say a quick spell to secure their privacy, before she sat down and pulled him down next to her. Ron was struggling with robes across from them in the opposite seat, but he was listening intently. He could feel Harry's sudden hopelessness.

'Harry, I know you don't want to be here. Hell, we all don't want to go, I can assure you.' She frowned at his clenched fists, 'I know you feel like we could be doing much more back in the Alley . . . but this is one chance we can't miss. It was no coincidence that he used the Founder's Objects. I just know that Hogwarts hides what we're looking for.'

'We could've infiltrated the castle,' Harry murmured, gritting his teeth.

'Harry, stop being so fucking stupid,' Hermione said coldly – her patience running thin. 'You know bloody well that if we hadn't replied to the letter they would've come searching for us. And that is exactly what we don't need.'

'They would've gone to the Dursley's and the orphanages. They would've found out we had run away and that we were missing,' Ron interjected, fixing his blank tie. Once they were sorted into their houses, their uniforms would automatically change for them.

Harry bit his lower lip hard, wanting to feel the sharp pain of it. He knew they were speaking sense, but . . . school? He never thought he'd ever have to say he was going to school. That utterly normal and boring word. School was a word and thing of another life he should've had.

All he felt was an overwhelming bitterness in his gut. And he didn't like it.

'Face it, we never had the time to focus on magic back in the Alley. We were working all the time,' Hermione said, taking a deep breath.

'And we were not learning. We were stagnant there.'

'We have to admit that our understanding of magic is weak,' Ron murmured, lighting a cigarette. He took a long, deep drag and blew out – the familiar smell filling the compartment. 'We had no teacher to guide our magic. There is only so much we can learn by ourselves.'

Harry increased the pressure of his teeth and he tasted metallic blood on his tongue. The strong pang spread quickly through his mouth, filling it. Slowly, he unclenched his jaw and freed his lip. He didn't feel like thinking. He just wanted to focus on the ache of his abused lip. It was strangely calming.

'I know . . .' Harry breathed out, then closed his eyes. He just wished he didn't understand. It would make arguing with his two bonded easier then.

'So stop acting up,' Hermione said with a glare, 'We have work to do. But first things first, act like a proper eleven year old. Please.'

Harry made a face at her, 'I told you that would be the hardest part, 'Mione.'

Ron chuckled at them, opening the window slightly, and then threw his stub out of it. 'Then we have to cancel the spell on our compartment before some very interested students come investigating. Eleven year olds can't do that spell.'

Hermione grinned and pulled down her spell. 'But can't I shoot the person that comes in, darling?' she said teasingly to the red-head. Ron smirked at her and gave her the middle finger.

'Sit on this,' he wagged his third finger slightly- 'and swivel,' he said nonchalantly, then busied his hands with another cigarette. Hermione put on a face of mock-offence and wiped a fake tear away from her eye.

'You wound me, Ronald,' Hermione said.

Ron snorted, 'Not enough, evidently.'

Hermione smirked, then gave out a hearty laugh.

Harry had long ago confirmed the fact that his bonded actually liked fighting and insulting one another . . . it was game to them.

Lazily, the red-head gazed out of the window with an extremely bored expression on his face. Hermione snorted again and set about getting ready. By the time she had the full uniform on, Harry was staring at her once more. He blinked once, and then again. With her hair short, she looked like a boy. But with the cumbersome uniform on – she really looked like a guy. The eye-patch didn't really help, nor did the thin scar she had running from her eyebrow to her ear too. Not to mention the fading bruise on her jaw.

Harry almost chuckled when he thought of how scruffy they all looked. Bruised, battered and worn out. They all looked far older than they really were in body.

They watched the sunset together in silence. Not touching. Not speaking. Thinking as little as they could. They all accepted the bitter, resigned melancholy that ran through the bond's link, because, at the very least, it was better than sadness.

xXx

'Firs'-years! Firs'-years over here!'

Harry saw Hermione grimace at the volume of the giant of man's voice, her disdain flooding the bond – making him grin. It was dark, the setting sun had left behind mountains and forests in a deep-purple glow and they could only see what the golden lanterns

that littered the platform revealed. Students were shadowed figures bobbing up and down as they walked and shuffled along – though the numbers had dwindled due to the fact that the trio had waited till most of the children had left the train.

Swinging his green-eyed gaze to his other side, Harry noticed that Ron was watching the huge man with a hairy face distrustfully. Harry sighed – after living in Knockturn Alley, one learned that you could never trust anyone, and most of all, a half-breed. Those with magical creature blood in their veins had been pushed out into the edges of wizarding society and had become desperate and hateful. On one level, Harry understood why the bitter half-breeds targeted wizarding folk – but they were weak and by being violent they brought more misery on their kind. But, as Hermione once pointed out, what choice did they have when no one accepted them or even spoke to them as equals? It was a vicious circle.

He stared at the half-giant as he boomed again, 'C'mon, follow me – any more firs'-years? Mind yer step, now! Firs'-years follow me!'

They were lead off the platform and down a steep, narrow path – the other children slipping and stumbling in the thick darkness, gasping and squealing as they went. Harry felt a brush of a leafy branch on his arm and figured that, even though he could not see well, there were trees on either side of them and the path they walked on. He felt wariness radiated from Ron and Hermione and he ghosted his fingers over his wand-holster.

To Harry's surprise, no words were shared on their journey down the path – the children were silent and probably filled with nerves. Though, there was a boy who was sniffing rather loudly.

'Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec,' the half-giant called out over his shoulder, making Harry nearly jump, 'Jus' round this bend here.'

Before them, suddenly, lay a great black lake. Over and across its expanse, lay the darkened shape of a castle perched on a high mountain – its towers and turrets alight with sparkling, small windows.

Loudly, a series of exclamations of awe and excitement ran in the cold night air. Harry rolled his eyes and thanked the darkness for the one small mercy of hiding his expression. Hadn't these children researched where they were going?

'No more'n four to a boat!' the huge half-breed said to the clustered group of eleven year olds. He pointed a meaty finger at a fleet of little boats by the shore. Harry, Ron and Hermione spied out one near the back, and were followed by dark-skinned boy, who sat down next to the three of them without a word or greeting. He didn't even look at them, which suited them fine.

'Everyone in?' the hairy man shouted, who was large enough to just fit in a boat by himself. 'Right then –FORWARD!'

After a slight lurch, the boats all set off at once – gliding through the calm water of the lake silently. There was an awed quiet hanging over the group of children as they gazed up at the castle before them. As they sailed forth, the castle got larger and larger – till it towered over them.

'Heads down!'

The trio ducked their heads automatically, as one, as ordered. A curtain of ivy passed over head and grew on the side of a cliff, revealing a wide opening that it had hid. A dark tunnel twisted for a bit, till they came across an underground harbour that seemed to be right under the castle. When the boats came to shore they clambered off and onto rocks and pebbles. Ron tugged on his bonded's arms, hurrying them, as he saw out of the corner of his eye that the half-breed was helping the other children out of the boats. It was

clear that Ron wanted nothing to do with the man – or god-forbid, be touched by him. One bad experience with a half-vampire in the Alley had been enough for the young red-head.

They were led down a narrow passageway by the half-breed's looming, silhouetted figure and his lamp - till they breathed in cool, fresh air and walked along damp grass before the what could only be the entrance of the castle. They made their way up a flight of stone steps and stopped as the man did, in front of a huge oak door.

'Everyone here?'

There was a soft chorus of positives and the half-breed nodded happily, then raised his fist and knocked on the door three times. It swung open at once and a stern faced witch with grey hair and emerald green robes stepped forward. Her hawk-like gaze surveyed the nervous faces of the children before finding its way back to the half-breed's jolly face.

'The first-years, Professor McGonagall,' said the man.

'Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here,' the witch said, pulling the door wide open to let them through.

Hagrid? Harry thought with a frown, the gamekeeper?

They passed through the large, high-ceilinged Entrance Hall and trailed behind Professor McGonagall as she went into a small empty chamber off the hall. By the drone of too many voices – the rest of the school was near and waiting. Harry stared and counted the flagged stones on the floor.

To the trio's distaste, the other children clustered closer than before to one another. They made sure that they were on the edges of the group – not too close or far to be noticeable. Harry hid the grin that threatened to come forth when he felt a wave of Hermione's volatile

anger – he just knew that she wanted to punch and hurt the pale, nervous faces before them till they were really and truly scared. To show them what true fear was.

He knew she felt that they had no right to be scared of something as stupid as the Sorting.

Harry gently laid a hand on Hermione's arm to calm her, his gaze flickering to Ron's impassive eyes. The red-head shrugged and leant against the stone wall with his arms crossed, an air of nonchalance about him. Harry brought his gaze back to Hermione, who was shaking slightly and had a bright light in her eye. Her small hand was jerking into a fist and Harry took it into his hand steadily. When the short brown-haired girl was tense, she got violent and needed to vent, especially when she was angry as well.

Harry let her dig her nails hard into his skin and ignored the sharp pain as his flesh tore. They couldn't have a fist-fight like usual in their situation, so it was the next best thing.

'Welcome to Hogwarts,' said Professor McGonagall. 'The start of term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family - ' Ron stiffened slightly at this – 'within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory and spend free time in your house common room.'

'The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin,' the witch carried on, her hands clasped before her, 'Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honour. I hope each of you will be a

credit to whichever house becomes yours.'

'The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting.'

Her eyes lingered on Harry's unruly hair, Hermione's ruffled up spikes, Ron's loose shirt and a few others for a moment each, before saying, 'I shall return when we are ready for you. Please wait quietly.'

The witch swept round and strode out of the chamber, her robes fluttering out behind her heels. Once she was out of sight, the crowded room erupted into anxious whispers and frantic energy. Harry stopped himself again from rolling his eyes when some fool asked whether they had to fight trolls for the test nearby. Ridiculous speculations rolled off their tongues and Ron was chuckling softly, while his fingers were unconsciously itching towards his cigarette pack in his robe. Harry leaned forward and grabbed Ron's hand, giving him a stern look – the red-head had agreed not to smoke till they were safe. Ron stuck out his tongue at him.

They stood, each holding one of Harry's hands, when several people screamed suddenly. Hermione's hand shot to her wand, but stilled when a number of ghosts streamed through the walls – all talking urgently to one another without noticing the first years. They were pearly-white and semi-transparent and glided.

Harry didn't catch what they were talking about, but he caught the word 'Peeves' a few times. They passed through without a glance in their direction, but they left a few children very shaken. Harry peered at Hermione for a moment, noting the fascination in her dark eye as she followed the ghostly figures with her gaze.

Professor McGonagall returned shortly and herded them into a single line before telling them to follow her. Hermione stood in front of Harry, while Ron sauntered in behind. They were led to a pair of double

doors, which opened just before they came to it, and walked into the Great Hall.

Thousands of candles floated in the air above their heads, above four long, full tables and a glided one where all the teachers sat. Hundreds of heads were turned in the direction of the first years as they entered and silver ghosts hovered near the edges of the hall. Harry lifted his green eyes to the ceiling and saw the famous bewitched ceiling of Hogwarts. It looked exactly like the starry night sky outside, and he couldn't help but be impressed at the skill of the spellwork.

Ron poked his back from behind and he was brought out of his musings. He focussed on Professor McGonagall, who was silently placing a four-legged stool on the floor and on top of it she dropped a dirty, pointed wizard hat. Harry peered with a small amount of eagerness at the hat, knowing well what it was. He felt a shiver gone down his spine when he thought of how valuable it was – as it had been created by the Founders together.

He didn't listen to the song the hat had started to sing, but looked around at the faces in the hall. He glanced to his right and saw a table with students decked in red and gold. Immediately, he noticed two identical older boys were staring at Ron with looks of utter shock. They had the exact same red shade in their hair as Ron. Harry blinked a few times, then straightened and looked ahead once more.

He had an ill sense of foreboding in his gut.

The brim of the hat closed as it finished and Professor McGonagall came forward, holding a scroll in her hands. 'When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted.'

There were muted sighs of relief from the line of first years.

'Abbott, Hannah!'

A blonde-haired girl stumbled to the stool and sat down, and after a moment hesitation, she put the hat on her head. Silence, then . . .

'HUFFLEPUFF!'

There was a bout of cheering as the girl found her way to the Hufflepuff table and joined it.

'Bones, Susan!' Professor McGonagall called out loudly.

'HUFFLEPUFF!'

A shaking, pale-faced girl rushed off to join Hannah. Harry noted that she flinched away from the waiting hands and claps of congratulation on her back. The dark-haired boy decided to keep that information away for another time.

'Boot, Terry!'

'RAVENCLAW!'

A boy with a large burn scar on the one side of his jaw walked away and sat down with the students decked in blue. Harry recognised the type of burn scar he had, as Ron had a few on his thighs and back – it was from oil, and a technique the Death Eaters had used in the labs during the war.

The line steadily cleared as the students were sorted into their houses. There was a sense of hushed excitement in the hall and Harry wondered why – that was until one name was called.

'Longbottom, Neville!'

A brown-haired boy with a thin, pink and circular scar on his forehead strode forward with determined eyes. Whispers erupted in the hall,

people were craning their heads to see the boy and have a good look at him.

'Longbottom, she said?'

'The Neville Longbottom?'

Harry stared at the famed Boy-Who-Lived, as he placed the Sorting Hat on his head. A surge of irrational anger flared in Harry and he curled his hands into fists. As he gritted his teeth, he asked himself: what was so special about this child? How did he kill Voldemort when he was only a year old? What did he do?

Why had it been him and not me?

Harry slowly forced himself to relax as the Gryffindor table erupted into rowdy cheers and whoops as Neville Longbottom was sorted into their house. A few Gryffindors were singing loudly in proud, pure joy. The boy looked like he hardly noticed he was getting the loudest cheer of all in his relief.

Harry looked up at the High Table and saw that most of the teachers were beaming at Longbottom, the Headmaster – Albus Dumbledore – included. Harry, for some reason he couldn't fathom, felt sick to his stomach at the peoples' response.

'Granger, Hermione!' McGonagall called out, making Harry start. His eyes followed Hermione as she walked in a forced calm to the stool. She sat down and lowered the hat onto her head and closed her eyes. Harry glanced around, noticing that all the attention was mostly still on Longbottom, but a few students were pointing and whispering about the eye-patch.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Then abruptly, the hat almost screamed, 'SLYTHERIN!'

Hermione whipped off the hat and strode off to the Slytherin table, a small, hardly noticeable smirk on her face and a smug feeling rushed through the bond from her. Harry unconsciously suppressed the bond again, as it had flared slightly. The boy wondered what his bonded had done for her to be feeling so pleased with herself.

'Potter, Harry!'

Harry took a deep breath and stepped out of the line. He walked forward, steadying his posture and walk as went forth. The stool was a dark brown and hard. Harry fingered the edge of the hat for a second, before sweeping it onto his head.

Immediately, Harry felt the probing and the defences he had created in his mind through his Occlumency. Without a thought, he strengthened his walls, but the probing became stronger – more powerful than anything he had come across. He could feel his walls crumbling within him.

And then his defences were breached.

Memories flooded before his eyes, flashing and in blurs. The violating search was as quick as it had been to get into his mind and he felt breathless.

'How . . .?' a small voice in his ear whispered, 'How could you children do those things and justify them?' There was an edge of fear and sadness mingled in it.

We just did.

'How can you live with yourselves? Just how?'

We want revenge – that is how we live with what we have done.

'I can't . . . I can't let you go into this school – you have killed-!'

Harry felt a rush of dread and finally understood what Hermione had done. He focussed on the memory of the night he had first killed a man – the coldness in his heart, the lack of emotion in him as he watched the blood run and drip off the man's limp fingertips. He thrust all the images and emotions upon the hat of that night.

We will let nothing get in our way.

He thrust another memory of the hate that ran through him as he watched Ron strangle the Death Eater till the life left him. The hat had to understand. He would make it understand.

You, a mere hat – or even the Headmaster. No-one, absolutely no-one, will stop us from having our retribution.

Harry dug his fingers into the underside of the stool.

So, Sort me, hat. Or I will bring your beloved school down to its knees.

There was a silent, utterly silent moment where the hat barely moved. Then the brim of the hat opened slowly:

'SLYTHERIN!'

Harry jumped off the stool and placed the hat down on it. He stared at the hat for a moment, before placing one foot in front of the other and made his way to the place next to Hermione. She gave him a crooked smile.

'It understood,' he whispered, grabbing her hand under the table and clutched it. She gave him a small nod, her eye unreadable.

'Weasley, Ronald!'

Ron's red hair glowed in the candlelight as he sauntered along the aisle. With one hand in his pocket, he placed the hat lop-sided on his head unceremoniously. A few people laughed and chuckled at this as they waited for the hat's verdict.

It took a full minute before the hat shouted, 'SLYTHERIN!'

No surprise there, Harry thought in a morbid amusement. He leant his elbow on the table's edge and rested his chin in his palm. Isn't it ironic that we're in the very house of the snake, of the Dark Lord, of Voldemort?

If Hermione heard his thought by any chance, then she didn't reply. Chuckling, Harry realised that she wouldn't know what to say.

xXx

'... nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!'

Harry let his gaze fall from the wizened old face of Albus Dumbledore to the filling plates upon the table – his arm falling to the surface from his face. If he didn't know the story and achievements that Dumbledore had – he would have dismissed him as a mad man. But Harry couldn't help but feel there was an air of falsity around the wizard – that he too acted. The dark-haired boy shrugged a shoulder and reached for his eating utensils.

He glanced at Hermione and followed her fixated gaze – to find that she was staring at the almost unholy amount of meat on the table. Harry felt ill when the smell of the meat wafted into his nose and he started breathing through his mouth to avoid becoming sick.

After seeing the memories – of actually being Hermione in them after the ritual – they had not been able to stomach meat. The memory of Hermione's parents' organs as they were shoved into her mouth was too fresh in their minds.

Ron calmly took some vegetables and roast potatoes from the platters. He shot a warning glance at Harry and Hermione – stabbing at his food as a message. They mentally shook themselves and followed the red-head's lead.

'My, I never thought that a Potter would enter the ranks of Slytherin,' a voice drawled from across the table. Harry looked up and froze – for moment it was like Lucius Malfoy was sitting before him. But then his senses came back to him when Hermione pinched his thigh painfully under the table.

A thin boy with a pointed face and sleeked back blond hair was watching him with a calculating stare, 'The Potters have a history of being strictly Gryffindors.' He waved a hand in a dismissive way, 'Don't you think that it was a shame that your family's pure-blood was tainted just at the last moment?'

Harry bit his lower lip – all this information wasn't new to him, as Voldemort told him so in a very different manner. He straightened his back and brought his gaze to the boy's. Harry didn't open his mouth as he stared coldly back.

The boy wasn't smiling when he broke the silence, 'I'm Draco Malfoy, by the way.'

'I know,' Harry said slowly and deliberately. Malfoy frowned slightly for a moment, before clearing his face of expression and turning to Ron, who was eating his food unhurriedly.

'Now, I'm surprised that a Weasley is a Slytherin,' Draco Malfoy said with a smirk, 'What did you do to get here, Weasel – hurt dear Mummy's feelings before she burned to death?'

Ron's fork stopped mid-way and he lowered it to his plate. Slowly, he turned his head to face the blond-haired boy and his blue eyes were

frozen. He held Malfoy's gaze unfalteringly, before scooping up a fork full of potatoes and eating it.

Malfoy's furious eyes were the only thing that betrayed him and Harry hid a smirk as the blond turned to Hermione.

'Hermione? Isn't that a girl's name?' Malfoy said in his drawl that so contrasted with his grey eyes. 'Did your muggle parents mistake you for a girl at birth, mudblood?'

The corner of Hermione's mouth twitched upwards, and she pierced the skin of her potato, 'You're the one who is mistaken.'

Malfoy's pale face coloured slightly, 'Want to be a guy then, Granger? You certainly look like one in the male uniform.'

'It's practical,' she said with a bored air.

Malfoy looked like he was going to say something, but a pug-faced girl with black hair touched his arm lightly, giving him a hard look. Harry heard her whisper, 'Don't make a fool of yourself, Draco.'

As Harry finished his meal, he gazed up at the High Table where all the teachers sat in interest. He heard a prefect point out where the Head of Slytherin House was and he looked in the direction. Harry stared at the limp, greasy hair and sallow skin of long-nosed man with a frown. He recognised this man, this Professor Snape's face from somewhere. Snape's face was emotionless and dark-eyes unreadable, but . . . Harry's eyes widened – his face had not been so empty then.

For a moment, an image of a pitying expression and sad eyes came to Harry. No, the man had not been as cold when he had unchained a young, hurt boy from the Dark Lord's bed.

Harry glanced at Hermione and Ron at his side. They were staring at

him, their eyes showing their curiousness and worry. Harry nodded vaguely to the teacher's table and sent an image of Snape through the bond to them. When Hermione rested her gaze upon the man – she froze slowly, her shoulders lowered and stiffened.

Harry felt for the link between them and nearly started at the hate simmering forth in his bonded. He was going to look up at Hermione in question, but before he could, she sent a thought to them:

He's got the Dark Mark.

Ooo

Author's Note: argh . . . so many pages in one day O.o this is a first draft – I haven't really gone over it, sadly . . . but I'm tired and bored and got work to do for tomorrow. So if there are any glaringly wrong errors in this chapter – please say so! Writers can always improve :)

This is the first time I have ever written Hogwarts, or an evil Draco so go easy on me . . . there are a few extracts and passages from the Philosopher's Stone – McGonagall speech about houses and blah blah etc. The joke about the middle finger and swivelling is not mine, sadly, but its brilliance is some other dude's – one I can't remember :P

Chapter 13 – Severus Snape

They were making far too much noise.

Severus Snape sneered down at the students mingling and chatting along the four tables, from his chair and vantage point on the High Table. From the raised platform the Table stood on, all the teachers could see precisely where all the troublemakers were – which had proved to be efficient in the past.

Severus had never liked the Welcoming Feast – he found it abominable more like – he did not appreciate new students and most of all first years. Why would anyone want to welcome them? They were young, cheeky, messy and intolerable. And just because of this fact, he believed in strict discipline when it came to the brats. He made sure that they were quaking in their boots by the time they left his classroom for the first time – and the more in tears there were, the better.

Brought out of his most favourable musings of the torture awaiting his students by a loud laugh, Severus glanced over at Albus Dumbledore and frowned – it was only because of the man that he was even in the Hall. The potions professor thought wistfully of his bottle of Firewhiskey in his cabinet and suppressed a sigh. He just had to deal with this frivolity, like usual. He had to gather up the meagre patience he had within himself, which was annoyingly hard.

Suddenly, silence engulfed the Hall as the doors swung open to reveal a line of small children – the first years. Idly, Severus watched as Minerva McGonagall readied the stool and Sorting Hat with a solemn air and her almost permanent stern expression. After a few years of working at Hogwarts, Severus had gotten into the habit of zoning out whenever the Hat sang, as it usually said the same thing and thus it was not as interesting as it had been. Rather, he found himself wandering the faces of Hogwarts' new students.

Severus' dark eyes were drawn to a single head in the line that was not turned in the direction of the Hat. The boy's dark hair was long and unruly, almost hauntingly familiar to a person he once knew, and it hid his face and expression. A frown crept onto the man's face as the child ducked his head after a moment and righted its direction – but Severus still could not see the boy's face as another child with an eye-patch was obscuring his view.

Almost starting when a loud and sudden applause broke out, Severus shook his head and his eyes darted to Minerva, who was unrolling a piece of parchment. The old witch started calling out the names, but this too Severus did not concentrate on. He only listened when his house was mentioned.

'SLYTHERIN!' the hat shouted, and a blond-haired boy whisked off the stool with an arrogant gait.

It was no surprise to the greasy-haired man that Draco Malfoy joined Slytherin – the boy was a clone of his father and was following very closely behind in his sire's footsteps. It was amusing to see that the Hat didn't even have to think about its choice. Severus chuckled softly at the thought of how proud Lucius would be of this fact.

A few minutes later, a hard-faced girl called Pansy Parkinson, daughter of a pure-blood family, joined Draco. She was nattering away to the boy, who looked like he wasn't listening to a word she was saying. Typical, Severus told himself as he suppressed another sigh.

Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle lumbered over to the Slytherin Table - they looked like they had nothing but air between their ears to Severus' exasperation. Also purebloods, and most probably in-bred – hence their appearance.

Blaise Zabini, Millicent Bulstrode and Theodore Nott – another three first years Slytherin had gained.

Strange, Slytherin is quite popular this year, the man noted with a raised eyebrow. Though, they don't have much choice, of course.

He had the strange urge to chuckle.

'Longbottom, Neville!' he heard McGonagall say loudly.

Severus' back straightened marginally and his cold gaze shot to the aforementioned boy. Unflatteringly, he watched as the brown-haired and scarred child stride up to the stool. The famous circular scar on his forehead was bared for all to see – and when Severus looked up at the tables, he glared when he noticed that he was not the only one fixated with the Boy-Who-Lived.

'GRYFFINDOR!'

With a small grimace, he tore his gaze away from Longbottom and scowled at his empty plate. It was inevitable that the boy – the hero of the whole wizarding world – to be in the golden houses of idiots. He probably had nothing but reckless courage at his arsenal.

'Granger, Hermione!'

Severus saw out of the corner of his eye that the child with the eye-patch had moved. He blinked when he ran the child's name in his head again – wasn't Hermione a girl's name? He stared at child, at the male uniform and short hair, then frowned. The child was small and at the age where they could be taken as either gender.

'SLYTHERIN!' the Hat almost screamed, which made Severus' frown deepen.

Severus watched as the child strode away and he couldn't help but notice the quiet confidence of that walk. A small tug at the child's lips for some reason he couldn't fathom. Granger . . . Granger. He

had not heard of a pure-blood family with that name, but he knew that it was quite common amongst muggles. Where was that confidence stemming from?

Suddenly, a tendril of magic flared softly and Severus' hand shot to his wand under the table. His eyes were narrowed and his lips in a terse line. As quick as it had sprouted, it had disappeared – which made the man wary. What had it been? He did not recognise it, but the taste of it was familiar . . .

'Potter, Harry!'

Snape froze, suddenly unable to believe his ears. Had he heard right? No, he couldn't have . . . Potter? Disgusted at how frantically he brought his gaze to the small figure walking up to the Hat, he felt his eyes go wide at what he saw. The same dark, unruly hair that had caught his attention not long ago was parted to reveal big green eyes.

Lily, oh Lily . . .

Severus took in a deep, shaky breath and shook his head – his limp hair following the movement. The similarity of those eyes to ones of the only person he had ever loved was uncanny and painful for him to see. There was no mistaking her son . . .

Then he let his gaze rise up and to the lightning bolt scar carved brutally into the pale flesh.

Dread, anger and sickness entered his gut all at once and with staggering intensity. He could never forget that scar – the mark of the Dark Lord's 'pet'. He had seen many children and young adults wear that scar, but they never lived to see the world beyond it. Only one child was saved from the execution in store for them when the Dark Lord got bored – and he had freed that child. He had unchained that boy from the bed and carried him to one of the safe havens.

And that child had been Lily's son.

And he never knew.

The boy had been another nameless child, one that had had a resemblance to Lily and only added to his guilt, but how was he to have known? They had all thought the boy dead along with his parents, even though no body had been found. The main reason he had let the child go and had not let his group member kill him in mercy was because of those eyes, those achingly familiar eyes . . .

It felt like, at the time, that if he let this boy die – it would be like losing Lily all over again. He knew he had been irrational, but Lily's death, even nearly two years later, had been too raw.

The boy was still on the stool, his posture straight and balanced. His hands were clenching around the seat and that was all he could see as he had his back to Severus. The wait for the Hat to speak felt far too long, but in reality he knew it was not so. For a moment, he felt a solid certainty that the boy – Harry – was going to be Sorted into Gryffindor.

Like his mother, like his father.

A surge of hatred erupted at that thought, at the memory of James Potter. A deep-seated anger stirred, but Severus suppressed it. He needed to think clearly.

'SLYTHERIN!'

Shock flooded his system. Had he heard right? No, no, no . . . James Potter's son in Slytherin? In his very house? For a second, Severus had the image of his enemy rolling in his grave. And groaning, and screaming at that.

Potter's uniform coloured slowly into green and silver as he made his way to the Slytherin table. It felt wrong, just wrong to see those colours on a Potter. The boy sat down next to the Granger child and whispered something – somehow, Severus got feeling that they were close, or knew one another well. It was just how his body language relaxed slightly when he was near the child.

'Weasley, Ronald!'

Usually, Severus wouldn't bother with the last student Sorted, but when a child of that torn apart family appeared and had emotionless eyes, ones that contrasted so greatly with his actions – he just had to watch.

'SLYTHERIN!'

Severus had known Molly and Arthur Weasley from the Order in the war – they had been pure Gryffindors till the end. He really wondered what they would've thought of their son if they knew what house he was in.

Would they have turned away from him, or welcomed back with opened arms?

Severus didn't notice the small, bitter smile on face as he realised that Gryffindors were idiot enough to love their children anyway.

xXx

'Did you see the boy – Neville Longbottom, the very Boy-Who-Lived?' he heard Sprout whispering to Sinistra excitedly as all the teachers made their way to the Staff Room. It was tradition to go there after the Welcoming Feast for a drink and to chat amongst themselves. But, to Severus' displeasure, it eroded in the course of the evening into gossiping by the fire. Thankfully, as a Head of House, he had to go introduce himself to the new Slytherin first years and

could escape such a fate.

'Everyone saw him, Pomona, calm yourself,' Aurora Sinistra said calmly back. 'But by Merlin, he looks like an interesting child . . .'

'I know!' Pomona sprout whispered breathlessly. 'The one that defeated the Dark Lord at such a young age . . .'

Severus gritted his teeth and stalked away from the chattering witches. He had heard of nothing else in the last few hours. Neville Longbottom this, Neville Longbottom that. He had had enough! When were they going to talk about the other first years, like in the previous years? An image of Harry Potter flashed in his mind immediately and he shoved it to the side. The sick feeling in his gut had not dissipated, so much so he had not been able to finish even half of his meal, and it strengthened whenever he let his thoughts concentrate on the boy.

But it was ridiculous! There had been not even a small mention of the other students and it slightly shocked Severus as to how obsessed these adults were of the idea of a hero, of the Boy-Who-Lived. Yes, the boy had saved all of them and many people from a life of fear and despair, but he was just a child! A brat, more like. He probably used all his fame to gain attention all the time. As teachers, they shouldn't add more fuel to the flame!

'Severus, here is the information,' a no-nonsense voice said from behind, startling him slightly. Severus swung round to face Minerva McGonagall and the portfolio in her hand. He blinked, then took the pages from the aged witch stiffly.

'Thank you, Minerva,' he said, trying to keep his tone respectful as best he could. Minerva was a formidable witch and someone he did not trifle with. He may never be friends with her, or be close – but he knew she was intelligent and he would give her respect for that. She had taught him long ago, after all.

Minerva nodded in reply and walked back to the fire and the cluster of colleagues. Severus stared after her for a moment, then turned his gaze down to the information she had given him. After the war, the amount of students with side-effects from it was enormous, especially when it came to the Experimental Section victims. In response to these damaging effects on the children, Hogwarts created a project many years ago for the victims that included therapy, talk sessions and medical check-ups. The Head of Houses were given each year a list of the new students that were ES victims.

Severus stared down at the small picture of a very young Harry Potter, with hospital clothes on and glassy eyes. The medical findings of the boy had not been updated in six years, since the initial scan at St. Mungos. The report detailed that the boy had been taken into the custody of his relatives. All information stopped there, after Potter had been left at the 'Dursleys'.

Flipping to the next page, he started at the picture of the red-head – the Weasley child. Hadn't all the Weasley children been evacuated with the Order when the Burrow burned down? Severus had not heard of any of the large clan to be missing, except for the death of one of the older boys. But then again, he had not gone out of his way during the war to find out their fates after the burning.

Dark eyes frowned down at the next picture – who was this bushy-haired girl? He glanced at the name and blinked. Hermione Granger? So the child was female! He didn't recognise her without the eye-patch. In the small picture of her, a tiny hand covered her right eye, so what lay behind the present leather covering was hidden. But what was foremost in his mind was one question: what had possessed the child to hack off all her hair?

Letting his eyes wander the page, he noticed that the girl also had no medical records after 1985, exactly the same as Harry Potter. Flipping back to the Weasley child, he saw the same. Why hadn't the

orphanages and relatives taken them for the check-ups - the ones that were compulsory for ES victims? The children had all been given a letter explaining their situation and condition to their caretakers.

He shook his head and closed the portfolio. Without a backward glance at his co-workers, Severus Snape strode out of the room and headed to the dungeons.

xXx

'Are these all of them, Mr Flint?' Severus asked coldly, watching the first years from the under the archway of the entrance. They were all quiet and staring at him, fidgeting and shaking slightly. Snape scowled at them, before dismissing the prefect.

'I am Severus Snape, the Head of Slytherin House and Potions Professor at this school,' the greasy-haired man started, looking down at them with unkind eyes. 'I am not a tolerant person, nor a patient one. If any of your rule breaking and after hour wanderings come to my attention – then I will take action without qualms, even if you are in my House. We are Slytherin and that means we are isolated – do not expect kindness from the others teachers and houses of this school. If you have a problem with a fellow Slytherin, you keep it to yourself, or in the dungeons. Outside, you will be a group and a unit before Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. If you do not follow this, you will crumble and that is the reality of being in this house.'

'Now, if any of you have questions, please ask the prefects. I do not take lightly to being disturbed in my potions lab or office, so do not bother me with useless and idiotic queries,' Severus glared at them as he said this. 'With that said, you are all dismissed.'

A stunned silence commenced. Severus turned around and said in a flat tone, 'Potter, Granger, Weasley – follow me. The rest of you . . . dormitories now.'

Without glancing back, he strode out of the Slytherin Common Room with his black robes swirling out behind him. He heard three pairs of soft footsteps hurry after him as he stalked the dim-lit passageways towards his office and rooms. He spelled his door open and settled himself behind his desk, waving his wand to silently transfigure two more chairs for the children.

'Sit,' he said, absently placing the portfolio McGonagall had given him on the desk. 'It has come to my attention that you three are war victims.'

Severus looked up at the trio, not letting any emotion onto his face. Hermione Granger was looking off to the side, presumably at the pickling jars that lined the wall, while Potter was staring straight at him with an attentive pose and expression. Severus looked into the dark-haired child's eyes, hoping to find something – recognition, perhaps? But Potter merely respectfully listened and waited. Shooting his gaze to the red-head, he noticed that the boy's hands were shaking slightly and itching to chest.

Severus frowned and spoke again, 'It is within my duty as your Head of House to take your situation in hand. You three will report to me each month – I will be watching your grades very closely, noting your behaviour and be questioning your classmates about your person within the school environment. Every week for the next term, all ES victims have to report to Madame Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing for medical tests and scans. In the term after that, depending on your mental and physical health, you will only report to Madame Pomfrey each month. This is all for your well-being.'

Severus stilled and said nothing for a moment, his frown deepening at the stony silence, 'It is compulsory for your three to join a discussion group every two weeks with other students, who are victims as well, and it is manned by Professor Sprout, whom you will shortly and surely meet.'

'You have the choice of seeing a private psychologist or speaking to me,' Severus said with a slight grimace. 'For you three, my door is always open.'

The Granger girl was now watching him with her dark eye, her expression was not completely free of emotion, but tainted with . . . disdain? His stomach clenched slightly and he couldn't figure out why.

'It is very strange for them to assign one of your kind to a position such as this,' the girl said in a low voice. Her gaze fell to Severus' forearm, to where the Dark Mark marred his flesh, with a deliberate lack of haste. Her eyelashes fluttered and she looked up into the potion master's hard eyes again.

Severus felt frozen, but he consciously made his body relax. 'Really? And what would you know, Miss Granger?'

'Just because I was young then it doesn't mean that I don't remember things – there are things I will never forget, Mr Snape.'

'It is Professor Snape to you,' he corrected, his dark eyes narrowing.

Granger looked to the side again and murmured indifferently, 'Yes, Professor Snape.'

Severus felt anger rise up in him at the girl's cheek. How dare she treat him with such disrespect? He was trying to help them. Couldn't they see that?

He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. Reacting in anger to such an attitude was not the way to go, as he had learned from experience. These children are victims of horrific acts and more often than not, have fragile minds.

'I need to know if any of you want to see an external person for your therapy while at Hogwarts,' Severus carried on, resting his clasped hands on the wooden surface of his desk. 'So?'

They all glanced at one another, then Potter said in a quiet voice, 'We want to have a psychologist from the outside, preferably one that is muggle-born or a half-blood. All our sessions must be together.'

Severus nodded, 'Next time you come here for your report, I'll give you a list to look through. And now for the situation of the dormitories . . .' Severus stared at them for a long moment, 'You'll all be getting separate rooms from one another, away from the others from your year. This is for your privacy and for the quality of sleep of your fellow students. One or two of you scream in your sleep, right?'

Potter nodded solemnly, 'We all do.'

Severus' eyes widened slightly, but he brought them back to normal. He saw out of the corner of his eyes that the red-head was frowning with his lips parted.

'Mr Weasley?'

'Ah, I was just wondering, sir,' the boy said hesitantly, 'Can we have a room together? Or at least connected together?'

'Your rooms are connected, as far as I know, Mr Weasley.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Silence reigned once more and did so uncomfortably. Granger was stubbornly not looking in Severus' direction, Potter was twiddling his thumbs of all things and Weasley had a hand on his chest.

There was a knock on his door and Severus called for the person to come in. Marcus Flint, one of the Slytherin prefects, walked in and

stood respectively at a distance.

'Mr Flint here will be showing you three where your rooms are,' Severus said evenly. 'You are all dismissed.'

The man did not watch as the children left his office, or as the door swung closed. He was trapped in the thoughts of how he had to deal with the three war victims in his midst. Should he just tolerate them? The Potter boy was the son of the man he hated, but also the only child of the woman he loved. Granger obviously hated Death Eaters, and rightly so – it was evident that she wanted nothing to do with him. The Weasley boy was from a family of Gryffindors, the brother of the Twins, and was probably brought up hating anything remotely related to Voldemort.

Now all of them were in the Dark Lord's very house.

It was no wonder that they refused to speak more than was necessary. As Severus leant back in his chair, he asked himself if he had the right to hate them for things they had no choice in choosing. No child could ask for certain parents – they got them and that was it. No child could choose how they would grow up, because it was their only reality.

They were put on a road and they were too young still to see that there were many more around them. No child of that war deserved petty hatred for things they could not change.

No, he had to help them.

Ooo

Author's Note: sorry for the wait, but a plot bunny attacked my brain during the past week. I've managed to evade the damn thing . . . I had this half done for aaaages, and I was in a happy mood for while, so I got no inspiration for this story.

I woke up sobbing this morning – I dreamt that I was holding a beautiful baby boy in my hands, who had had his head smashed in. My dad was driving to the hospital at the slowest speed possible and I was crying so hard that I couldn't scream at him to go faster. Blood pooled in my hands and dripped onto my pants and I felt utterly powerless. I won't go into the gory details, but I was not happy, or am still. People, if you get pregnant, don't have a home-birth. My sister did and her baby died. I was nine at the time and it tore my family apart. I saw the dead body of my niece and it will scar me for life. It has taken me almost seven years to stop crying whenever I even think of her.

Home-births are not better, they're just stupid. We have modern technology for a reason and it saves lives. Have a C-section, or a natural birth if you must – but have it in a fucking hospital. At least the baby will have a chance then.

Anyway, I'll stop with my rant. Hope you enjoyed the new chapter! I found it pretty hard to write Snape . . .

Chapter 14 – Bruised Inside and Out

A cold seemed to seep in through the very stones that surrounded them at all sides. The torches that dotted the arching walls flickered as they walked past, making the shadows dance rapidly wherever they could. Hermione forced her hand to stop jerking in the direction of her wand at every sudden corner, at every loud footstep and breath. She tried to rationalise with her instincts that a threat could not lie at every place conceivable – but her body reacted in the way it had been trained to do. She couldn't, nor wanted to change that.

Ron has always been the actor, not me . . .

Hermione's nails dug into her palm hard. She didn't have the control that her red-headed bonded had over his actions. She liked to take action, think later. But if she gave into that - that man, that Severus Snape, would be dead at her feet. Rage simmered to the surface and she grimaced. They let a Death Eater walk away free from them! Oh, how she wanted his blood dripping from her hands . . .

When she realised that her blood was pounding in her ears, she calmed her breathing and steadied her step. In the wizarding world she knew that she had to control herself – there was no other option. So, Hermione followed the tall figure of Marcus Flint, with Ron and Harry behind.

The Slytherin Prefect stopped suddenly and turned to the stone wall beside him. Hermione peered at the wall, then at Flint. She watched as he raised a big fist, pressed his knuckles to wall and said clearly, 'Cras.'

Immediately, the stone blocks began to rumble, shiver and part. An archway was revealed and beneath it lay a thick oak door with a blackened handle. Flint reached out and opened the door, walking through once it was wide enough. With her fingers ghosting her wand's handle, she braced herself and followed the Prefect. A

relatively big room with a few empty shelves and a fireplace welcomed the trio – glancing around, Hermione noticed two doors on the other side of the room.

'To left is the boy's room and to the right – that room is furnished for you Granger,' Flint said in a bored voice, 'There are bathrooms connected to them. The room we're in is your common room of sorts, for studying and whatever you twerps do in your free time.'

Hermione's eye narrowed, but she forcefully relaxed it when Flint swung round to her, as she was the closest to him. She tensed as he walked towards her.

'My, I forgot how short first years were . . .' the Prefect started, leaning down slightly. 'But you brats grow so fast, so I can't be at fault.' He smiled mockingly at her, his big teeth yellowed in the glancing firelight. 'No, I'm never at fault, you'll find. I'm a Prefect, after all.'

He lifted his hand and just before it landed on Hermione, she spat out coldly, 'Don't touch me.'

Flint's hand shot back and his eyes were slightly wide as he stared at the girl before him. Her one eye was narrowed and was dark. Her clenched fists were shaking at her sides. Swiftly, Harry stepped forward and put on a smile.

'Please excuse Hermione, Prefect Flint,' Harry said in a cheerful tone, 'She's got one bad temper unfortunately. Please don't mind her.'

Flint turned to the dark-haired boy next to him and scowled. 'Well, bitches like her find out very, very soon what it is like to be in Slytherin. We don't take to little childish tantrums.'

'I see,' Harry said pleasantly, 'Thank you, Flint.' He inclined his head for extra measure.

The Prefect seemed flustered and annoyed by the response and left the room a moment later in a huff. The second the door closed, Hermione spun round and slammed her fist at Harry's face. He dodged, but caught the hit on his forearm and was pushed back. Hermione growled, gritted her teeth and used her other fist to aim a punch at his stomach. Just as her fist connected with skin and cloth, he kicked out at her side. She rolled away, the breath knocked out of her and wheezing. Without a thought, she shot forward and gave everything she had. They danced around one another, dodging, punching, kicking, hitting, hurting . . .

Harry counterattacked at the last moment and slammed his fist into her face, at the one side of Hermione's mouth. The one-eyed girl fell back and hit the wall and landed in a heap near the roaring fire. After a long moment, Hermione rolled onto her back on the floor, opened her mouth and laughed. She laughed and laughed, till she couldn't anymore.

'Satisfied?' Harry asked in-between pants. She moved her head to the side and grinned at him.

'Well, now that your minor brawl is over . . .' Ron said, a lit cigarette in hand and inches from his face. He was leaning nonchalantly against the wall near the entrance into their new quarters.

Hermione sat up and hugged one of her knees with an arm, 'Don't worry - we'll settle things for sure.'

Ron gave her a mildly exasperated look, before pushing himself off the wall. He sauntered over and slid onto the couch that stood before fireplace. He watched as Hermione let her gaze wander the room, as her breathing evened out and as she licked the blood off her split lower lip.

She raised her palm and spat into it. She inspected the bloody pool

and picked a tooth out of it as it floated, then threw it into the flames. She sighed and let her hand hang limp between her parted knees, watching as the blood dripped from her fingers to the floor.

'Another molar?' Ron asked, crushing the butt under his foot. He lit the next one as she nodded with an air of boredom and as Harry sat down next to him. Their gazes darted lazily to Hermione as she looked up from her musings and flicked her hand out – droplets of blood splattering the bare floor.

'The right room will be our lab for assignments and potions,' Hermione said with a grin. 'That okay?'

They nodded, listening to the crackling of the dry wood fuelling the fire.

They sat in silence, before Ron broke it as he cursed under his breath and muttered, 'Hell, what can I use as an ashtray in this place? Fucking wizards and their lack of vices . . .'

Harry chuckled and produced a shallow bowl from out of one of his robe pockets. 'You always forget to bring one, you idiot.'

Ron sent a glare at him, but nevertheless dumped the ash into the bowl, took it and placed it on his lap. 'I'm just being considerate, by not flinging the ash and butts all over the place.'

Harry smirked at him, 'You just don't want your face to be smashed in by 'Mione.'

The red-head scowled, 'Is it bad to have survival instincts? Just because you two like to be beaten to a pulp, doesn't mean I do. I shoot them before they can even try to. Unlike you two.'

Hermione gave Ron a side-long glance, 'You just can't take a hit like a man, you pansy.'

'Ha,' Ron snorted into his hand, 'Too true. I like my dignity, thank you very much. Bruises are sore and ugly, you troll. It's no wonder why people don't like you.'

'Ha, who would like a bitching guy like you anyway?'

'At least I don't look like a transvestite.'

'You look like you don't have a dick and balls.'

'Ouch, such a blow to my masculinity – I'm hurt!' Ron said sarcastically, placing a hand over his heart. 'But poor little you can't escape the tragic fate of being mistaken for male. However will manage to get laid when we're older?'

'The only thing that is little here is your dick, you fool.'

'Aww, give it time . . .'

Harry sighed as they continued to banter and insult one another. If the bond did not resonate with the humour and amusement they gained from their arguments, Harry would've knocked it both out of them. But he decided a long time ago to let them play their game . . . but only in private so he could conserve his sanity.

Harry glanced at the three trunks that lined the wall near the entrance to their quarters and looked at his bonded once more, 'I'm going to bed. Ron, did you check the quarters . . .?'

'I did, the moment we entered. The area is clean, except for the ward that surrounds the perimeter of our quarters and centre at the entrance. It's merely a guarding ward, not a surveillance type,' the red-head said, tapping his wand on the couch arm. 'We have nothing to worry about in here.'

Harry nodded and got up. He grabbed his trunk and wheeled it to the left room that was to be their bedroom. Inside, there were two beds and a small cupboard each to place their clothes in, presumably. Harry did not move, just his gaze did, as he sensed his bonded come up from behind and walk in.

'Well, this is a little smaller than what we're used to, but . . .'

Hermione said with a tinge of distaste, '. . . this will do, I suppose.'

'Stop being such a snob, 'Mione,' Ron said with a grin as he nudged her arm with an elbow. 'After the streets, this is heaven.'

'It is cleaner,' the young witch conceded as her hawk eye sought out the corners and suspected dust. 'The Hogwarts house elves do their job pretty well.'

They dumped their trunks in a corner and set to work. Ron and Harry dismantled and pushed the spare four poster bed base up against the wall to put it out of the way while Hermione slowly spelled the two mattresses together. Harry enlarged the second base to accommodate a double mattress and helped Hermione levitate it on to it. Ron shoved the spare cupboard to the side to make more space. After the ritual, the bond called for physical contact and more often than not, even if they slept in different rooms and different beds, they would end up curled up together in the morning. They had given up after a while and slept in the same bed voluntarily.

As Harry started placing their clothes and uniforms in the cupboards, he noticed an old coal heater and set it alight. The small room they had claimed as their bedroom warmed up quickly due to its size. After brushing his teeth, Harry switched off the lights and crawled into bed, feeling suddenly exhausted. Ron was on his back and under the covers next to him, a cigarette dangling between his forefinger and thumb.

'Your last one for tonight?' the dark-haired boy murmured sleepily,

staring at the profile of his bonded as he slowly blew out a cloud of smoke. The familiar smell slowly unstitched Harry's unease.

'Yeah,' Ron said in a rough voice, then gave out a dry cough. 'Got enough nicotine to last the night, I guess.'

Harry chuckled softly in reply. He rolled over till he was half on his side and saw Hermione out of the corner of his eye – she was pulling off her uniform near the cupboard and was throwing it haphazardly onto the cold stone floor.

'I'm going to have a shower,' she said, as she strode naked across the room to the bathroom. Harry watched her as she went – after living together for many years, they had lost the awkwardness of being naked around one another and most of the time they didn't even notice it. It was just so normal to see each other's bodies. Even when Ron and Harry teased Hermione about her protruding nipples or her growing breasts – they never got embarrassed. No one told them that it was bad or indecent to be so, and even if they did, they wouldn't listen.

They liked their little world.

As Harry snuggled into his new pillow, he realised that after having the most basic, raw emotions within constantly revealed to others – being physically naked in front of those people was nothing, and never would be. He heard the water of the shower cease and through the open doorway he saw Hermione inspect the many bruises that littered her body in the mirror. He smiled as she made faces at herself, and opened her mouth wide to see her teeth, before slipping on a baggy t-shirt that swamped her small frame.

She turned off the bathroom light and he heard and felt her fumble her way onto the bed. Ron cursed when she knocked his knee as she crawled over him. Finally, after much effort, she settled down at Harry's other side and took his hand under the covers, fingering the

scabs on his palm. Usually, the green-eyed boy would not sleep in the middle, as he would slowly succumb to the feeling of being overwhelmed . . . but that night he clutched her hand and let it all be. Maybe he was just tired, maybe he was accepting – but he didn't wonder much about it as he yielded to sleep.

xXx

'Tempus,' Ron murmured as he waved his wand. He stared at the floating figures with half-lidded eyes before glancing at his bonded. 'I suppose it's time to go to the Hall.'

Even though their internal clock was disorientated by the lack of windows and darkness of the dungeons, they had woken up at dawn as always. After a brief stint of meditating, stretches and warm-up exercises that had become as natural as breathing in the morning – they had cleaned themselves up and settled down to wait till it was time for the school to awake and head to the Great Hall.

As the red-head watched Harry and Hermione sling their bags onto their shoulders, he thought over how normal the morning had been – how it had lulled them all into a sense of peace. Hermione had yelled at Ron for leaving the toilet-seat up and at Harry for dripping water on the floor after his shower. The two boys had sat on the couch and shared a cigarette, while Hermione fussed over the state of their un-made bed. All the jokes and banter during their exercises . . . it seemed to him that they all didn't want to think of the day ahead.

Ron chuckled as he watched Hermione try to tame Harry's unruly hair with a brush, failing dismally as usual. They were all dressed to play the part of innocent eleven year olds, but nothing could make them leave behind a handy knife or pistol – their training had seen to that. Having one Fere Asper attacking them randomly in hallways made doubly sure of that.

They left their quarters, but only after they had made sure that they'd

be able to find it again. Ron had been trained by Fere to remember maps and to create them in his head, so they had no difficulty in finding their way to along the winding passageways. This ability to memorise their paths had helped them greatly in the past and it helped Ron as a strategist.

They passed the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room and all the students that were making their way up to the Great Hall. Harry spied out the huddled group of first years – Draco Malfoy was whispering to Zabini at his side and was pointing at the trio, a smirk on his face. His overly pleased expression made Harry wary immediately.

They walked along with the crowd of students and Harry felt someone bump into him, hitting his shoulder hard. Tensing up, Harry peered ahead to notice a smug Malfoy striding away. Pansy Parkinson followed in Malfoy's wake, giving Hermione and her blue-black bruise near her mouth a disgusted look. In reply, Hermione smiled at the pug-faced girl and gave her the middle finger.

As they made their way through the crowd, Harry heard the words 'mudblood', 'half-blood' and 'blood-traitor' whispered as they passed. Usually Harry didn't bother with such insults and was amused when they were thrown his way, but the continuousness of it started to grate on his nerves.

They had always been outcasts - so why had he even assumed that things would be different?

xXx

At breakfast they soon learned that they were not accepted by the purebloods in the house of Slytherin. When they sat down at the table to eat, all the surrounding students either moved away or if they couldn't, they whispered insults and glared in their direction. Harry was not perturbed by this behaviour, as the slurs were gentle compared to the ones that he had heard in his lifetime – though the

fact that they were singled out by their very house angered him slightly. Where was the solidarity?

They ate quickly and left the Hall without further ado. Their first lesson was Potions with Snape as their professor. Harry grabbed Hermione's hand as they walked to the dungeons, hoping that the simple touch would make her remember their place in Hogwarts. They couldn't be found out, not now, and if anyone found out what they had done . . .

Harry shook his head to clear his thoughts.

They waited outside the classroom, leaning against the wall and conversed quietly amongst themselves. They had all read the textbooks for potions – Hermione had forced them to – even though they had created much more advanced potions for Durand in Knockturn Alley. They slipped into the classroom early, to dodge Malfoy and his cronies, and took a table near the back.

Slowly, the other first years shuffled in – the red and yellow Gryffindors next to the silver and green of Slytherin. Malfoy took a seat next to Zabini in the front row, looking the part of an ever attentive student – musing over this; Harry concluded that the boy was going to be a suck-up to Snape, which disgusted him more than he liked to admit. So much of the blond boy reminded him of Lucius . . .

Snape started the class by taking the register, but paused at a certain name. As Harry peered up at the man's dark eyes he was startled to see hate swimming in them.

'Ah, yes,' Snape said softly, 'Neville Longbottom. Our new – celebrity.'

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle sniggered and looked over their shoulders at the frowning Boy-Who-Lived. What had Longbottom done to

Snape? Harry glanced between the man and boy with little interest, before carrying on with his doodling on the side of his parchment. Whatever happened, it did not concern Harry and his bonded. If the Death Eater harboured ill intentions towards the boy – Longbottom could deal with it, with the help of his hordes of fans no doubt.

'You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making,' Snape started in barely a whisper that made unpleasant shivers run down many peoples' spines, 'As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses . . . I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death – if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually teach.'

Harry stifled a snort at the little speech and wrote on the edge of his parchment: 'Malfoy looks like he's found his own personal Jesus.' He pushed the page towards Ron and Hermione and was rewarded with two small smiles and mirth running down the bond. As he turned to stare at Snape, he wondered if the man had ever met Durand Orexis – they had the same utter fascination with potions and wonderfully pleasant demeanour.

'Longbottom!' Snape said suddenly and sharply, making the aforementioned boy nearly jump out of his seat, 'What would I get if I added powered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?'

Draught of Living Death, Harry's mind immediately supplied. He had made one for a customer a few months ago. It was a tricky potion - one that he seriously doubted a first year could do, or even contemplate.

'I don't know, sir,' Longbottom said.

A sneer twisted Snape's face.

'Tut, tut – fame clearly isn't everything.'

Glancing around, Harry noticed that no-one had their hands up – no one was prepared to go up against Snape, even for the Boy-Who-Lived.

'Let's try again. Longbottom, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?'

In the stomach of a goat, Harry thought, remembering the day that Durand had ordered Hermione to slit a goat open and to find the bezoar within. The man had been disgusted at the cold efficiency of the girl as she had done the job, and refused to go near her till she had cleared off the guts on her hands thoroughly.

'I don't know, sir.'

'Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Longbottom?'

The brown-haired boy was staring defiantly back at the professor. Harry rolled his eyes at how much the boy reeked of all that was Gryffindor. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Malfoy and his cronies shaking in their silent laughter.

'What is the difference, Longbottom, between monkshood and wolfsbane?'

They are the same plant, which goes by the name of aconite.

'I don't know, sir,' Longbottom said quietly, 'but why don't you ask Malfoy? He looks like he's having a jolly good time being in the know.'

A few people, all in Gryffindor, laughed at this. Harry saw a dark-skinned boy wink at Longbottom and grin. Malfoy was glaring at

Longbottom and slightly pale.

Snape looked far from pleased, 'A point from Gryffindor for your cheek, Longbottom. And because of you, the entire class will have to write a three inch essay on the questions I asked. This lack of knowledge is astounding . . .'

Throughout the rest of the lesson, Snape prowled the classroom, taking off points off Gryffindor for the simplest things. They made a potion to cure boils, which the trio was very familiar with, and they struggled to make their product mediocre. Durand would've cursed them badly if he saw the mistakes they purposefully made during the lesson. Harry had to stop Hermione from making a poison on side – she wanted to throw it at Parkinson, she revealed later – and from Ron sabotaging a nearby Gryffindor's potion because he was bored and wanted a cigarette.

Snape strangely stayed away from their table at the back and this didn't bother them at all as they were having a conversation on Harry's piece of parchment – enjoying the freedom of insulting their fellow students without being heard. Hermione became quite colourful near the end and it was hard not to laugh. When Snape demanded that they bottle their product, Harry burned the parchment under the table while Ron handed in their potion.

'You are all dismissed,' Snape sneered as the bell went off, 'Granger, stay behind.'

Harry, Ron and Hermione stilled in their packing up and looked up at their professor, whose expression was unreadable. Malfoy was smirking again as he left, Parkinson and Zabini not far behind. When the room was emptied, Hermione gingerly went forward to Snape's desk.

'Potter, Weasley – out,' Snape snapped, as he watched them slowly walk to the door.

'I don't mind if they are here . . . sir,' Hermione said, her face closed off. She glanced at Snape's arm again and took a step back.

'As you wish,' Snape said with a frown, 'As it is my duty, I need to know how and where you got that bruise on your face.'

Hermione straightened, 'I tripped, sir.'

One of Snape's dark eyebrows rose, 'I see, you . . . tripped.'

'I was in my new room and I tripped on my towel that I left on the floor. Hit my mouth on the side of the bed in my clumsiness.'

The greasy-haired man stared at her hard for a long moment, before he shifted in his chair slightly. 'Then you must be more attentive to your surroundings from now on, Granger. You all have an appointment with Madam Pomfrey in your free period after lunch. She will be doing a medical check-up on each of you. With that said, you three are dismissed.'

xXx

History of Magic moved at a painful speed, so much so, that Harry heard Hermione mutter under her breath the titles of various books about exorcising ghosts. Ron hadn't even bothered with trying to listen to Professor Binns and had started writing his essay that was due for Potions instead. Harry didn't feel like doing anything, so he stared out the window with his head in his arms.

At the end of the lesson, they decided to go back to their quarters – skipping lunch as they didn't feel hungry. Angry glares from pompous wizards and witches could turn anyone off their food. They lazed around on the couch before the empty grate of the fireplace – Ron smoking, Hermione sharpening her dagger and Harry dozing. It seemed to them that their reprieve from the world was far too short

and before they knew it – they had to go to the Hospital Wing.

As they walked along the open hallways, they saw students on the grounds outside near the lake. The vestiges of summer still hung in the air and those in Hogwarts seemed to want to enjoy it best they could. Harry didn't like any particular season – all four had their faults and disadvantages. In summer, he had to worry about sweat giving away his scent to an enemy. In spring, he had to worry about coming across and touching poisonous plants. In autumn, it was difficult hiding in the wilderness and in the trees since the leaves fell off. In winter, he had to worry about frostbite and his footprints left in the snow lest he be followed.

Madam Pomfrey welcomed them at the door as they crossed the threshold into the Wing. She ushered them to the beds, gave them all hospital gowns and drew the curtains closed to give them some privacy. As Harry got out of his uniform, he gave the plain, itchy gown a look of distaste, but nevertheless slipped into it.

He drew back the curtain, peering out from behind it just as the medi-witch came out of her office holding a pile of papers in her arms. Her lined face brightened into a smile when she saw him and she drew out her wand.

'Well, do you want to go first?' Madam Pomfrey asked kindly. Harry was immediately reminded of hot chocolate when he heard her voice, which bemused him slightly. The dark-haired boy nodded and crawled onto the bed.

Ron and Hermione came closer once the older witch started waving her wand in complicated patterns that they had never seen before. Hermione couldn't mask her rapture as she finally saw healing magic in motion. Out of no-where, a long piece of parchment appeared in Pomfrey's other hand when she ceased her spell-casting.

'Thank you, Mr Potter,' she said warmly, 'Now, I need a sample of

your blood to complete the test. Do you mind needles?'

Harry didn't like needles, but he could handle them. The boy shrugged and offered his arm without hesitation - a shadow of sadness came onto the witch's face when she saw the scars near the inner part of Harry's arm. The Death Eaters in the war had not been gentle in their experiments.

'A prick on your fingertip will be enough,' she said and sighed softly. Harry watched her for a moment before pulling his sleeve down and proffered his hand to her silently.

When she finished, she drew back and said sincerely, 'Thank you.'

Ron and Hermione's tests went similarly - though Pomfrey smelt the cigarette smoke on Ron and asked to see under Hermione's eye-patch. After Pomfrey suitably reprimanded the stoic red-head, she turned to Hermione to inspect her eye.

'Can you move it?' the med-witch asked, tilting her head to the side.

'Only sometimes,' Hermione murmured in reply.

'Mmm, that means that you still retain the muscles around it . . . can you see anything from it? Anything at all?'

The short-haired girl shook her head from side to side.

'Well, that is to be expected . . .' Madam Pomfrey stepped back and frowned at the bruise on Hermione's face. 'Should I heal that for you?'

'No, it's fine, thank you,' Hermione placed a hand over her bruise, as if to protect it.

'Why not?'

The girl looked down, 'I . . . I just don't like having magic used on me, that's all. I don't mind it healing normally really.'

Pomfrey gave her a sympathetic and slightly pitying look, which sent waves of anger through her and the bond. Harry took his bonded's hand as discreetly as he could and squeezed it tight. A little while later the older woman sent them off to get back into their uniforms. The results of their tests went with Pomfrey into her office, not letting them have even a glance at them.

As they left the Hospital Wing to go to their next lesson, Harry still held onto Hermione's hand – knowing that it steadied her, that the touch grounded her more than anything else. Right after the door had closed behind them; Ron whipped out another cigarette and lit it. As the grey smoke left his mouth, his blue eyes darted to his chuckling friends at his side.

His expression held a bemused amusement and a small smile crept onto his lips as they walked. 'If Fere couldn't stop me, who can? Besides, I like it.'

They all grinned, with the sun on their faces and the steadfast stone beneath as they put one foot in front of the other - like they would always do, no matter what.

xXx

Author's Note: ah, this chapter is kind of a filler, sorry . . . but it is needed for the story as it reveals a few things, I guess. It's weird for me to write an evil Draco O.o I've never written him like this. But – the shit hits the fan in the next chapter . . . it really, really does. More evilness to be revealed!

Tell me truthfully; was there fluff in this chapter? I can't actually tell - which is pissing the hell out me.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed the chapter!

For IWanderingSoul, here's an answer for you: Yes, this will be a trio ship :) but that is way into the future, sadly. They are too young still and they have all this other shit around them and in their life – so it'll be a while till anything happens between them. Personally, I can't see it happening any other way – they only have one another to cling onto, so it's a natural progression.

Chapter 15 – It Stays Within

Harry lazily played with the remains of his cereal with a spoon, shoving the milky flakes from one side of the bowl to the other with no aim in mind. It was bright and early in the morning and the Great Hall was nearly full. The dull drone of too many voices put the dark-haired boy on edge, he felt slightly overwhelmed by the sheer amount of bodies all around him and his sensitive ears weren't helping. All the advantages they had gained from their training seemed to become the very opposite in a school environment, making it difficult to submerge themselves into it.

They had to make sure as they walked that they made a sound when people were near, their reflexes had to be forcefully dulled as one of them would've stabbed someone by now and they all had constant headaches from the noise. Their quarters seemed to be their only haven, but it was a flimsy balance.

It was a simple thing, really – they weren't and never would be safe.

Harry felt a heaviness settle on his shoulders at this thought. Why had he assumed, deep down within himself, that things would be different at Hogwarts? It was stupid and useless to have such a hope – to have hopes at all. He knew from experience that hoping was futile – only action and the strength to complete those actions held value.

Harry watched idly as Draco Malfoy took the package of sweets from his eagle owl when the post arrived. The thin-faced boy had been boasting the night before about the things his mother sent him from home. Harry didn't understand why he had felt a small amount of anger when he overheard this – he didn't like how irrational it had made him at the time, nor how there had been a sinking feeling in his stomach. Everything about Malfoy made him uncomfortable, made him remember things he'd rather not and sometimes it was hard to breathe properly around the boy.

'Look, Malfoy's going at Longbottom again,' Ron whispered as he buttered a piece of toast. The red-head jerked his head in the direction of the Gryffindor table and Harry couldn't help but look. Malfoy and his two lumbering thugs were standing before Longbottom and his two friends – Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan.

It had become evident quite quickly days prior that the Boy-Who-Lived and the Malfoy heir were not on friendly terms. They fought in corridors, threw insults and made rumours about each other. Harry found he was relatively amused by their rivalry, as the immaturity of it all would make anyone who had lived on the streets laugh out loud. If the two boys had acted as such in the streets, they would've had the shit beaten out of them in a flash – one learnt respect and how to hate properly in the gangs. They said they hated one another, but they knew nothing of what true hate was.

No, they merely disliked one another.

Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly and ran his fingers through his hair, before letting his gaze wander to the High Table where the teachers sat. Severus Snape was eating his breakfast stiffly and talking to a man next to him, who wore a turban on his head. Harry instantly recognised him as Professor Quirrell, the Defense against the Dark Arts teacher. They hadn't had a lesson with him as of yet, but according to their timetable they had one later on in the day.

For a moment, Harry stared at him curiously – taking in the strange appearance of the man – before Quirrell brought his eyes up to rest on his. It was as if the air was knocked out of him and his green eyes went wide, unable to break the connection of their gazes. Harry dug his nails into the flesh of his wrist and the pain managed to undo his stupor. He quickly looked down at the tabletop, but he was unable to shake off the feeling of those eyes on him.

Then he felt it – the feeling he hadn't felt in six years . . . the sudden sickness in his stomach, the acidic taste in his mouth as bile threatened to free itself.

Voldemort.

Harry gripped the edge of the seat beneath him with both hands, in an attempt to hide his shaking. It felt uncontrollable, unreal . . . though he shook his head, gathered himself as best he could and straightened. Through the link they shared, ignoring the blinding headache that accompanied the action, he sent one message:

He's here, somehow.

xXx

'Those bitches,' Hermione nearly growled, her mouth twisted into an ugly sneer as she held her book in front of her. Her bag lay open next to her feet, as she sat in her seat. Her long fingers were taunt and pale as she clutched her book tightly, the blood draining from them.

The Transfiguration classroom was open, but empty as they had left the Hall early again. Harry and Ron's gazes darted to the book in her hands and frowned at the words written all over the front cover.

'You taint the purity of our house! You are not welcome, mudblood!'

'Get out or we'll make you go!'

'Go back to the dirty-blooded whores who birthed you!'

Hermione covered the rest with her palm – she was trembling slightly, her posture hunched and tense. 'Those fucking bitches . . . defiling my property, my parents' names . . .'

Harry gripped the girl's wrist tight, almost painfully and stared her

down. 'Hermione, calm down. Right now.'

Hermione gave him a side-long glance, her eye dangerously wide and pupil dilated. 'I want, need, blood.' A shiver ran down her body.

Harry reached out slowly, fingered the scab on her lip gently, before taking it between his forefinger and thumb and tugged down hard – splitting the wound open again. The sudden, unexpected pain made the girl gasp softly, and her hand shot up to her mouth. Harry settled back in his seat next to her, watching out the corner of his eye as she licked the blood off the wound tentatively with her tongue.

She rubbed off the droplets that had fled down her chin with the back of her hand and murmured a thank you.

Harry nodded and crossed his arms.

Taking the edge of the cover of her book, Hermione cleared off all emotion on her face and ripped it off with a near agonising lack of haste – it was as if she wanted to burn the words into her memory and to savour her mild retaliation. Ron and Harry watched as she did so, as she crumpled the page in a hand and set it alit on the table. The quick flames engulfed the paper.

As Harry stared at the settling ash, he realised that even if they buried the evidence of what had happened to them and of what they had done – the memories would never fade, nor the effect.

'A piece of Him is here, yeah?' Hermione asked quietly, her eye strangely empty as it swung up to him. 'You felt it?'

'Yeah,' Harry gave out a soft sigh, 'You were right about Hogwarts.' Why did he feel so tired? It was like there was a cloud hanging around his head. He lifted a hand and rubbed his eyes, but the relief gained from the action was brief.

Hermione stilled and was silent – Harry could sense her using Occlumency to smother her emotions, to hide the potent rage that still simmered beneath the surface. They sat like that till the start of the lesson and did not speak even after. Sometimes, speaking only muddled things up and emotion was easier to understand.

Well, only sometimes.

xXx

The bell went off loudly in the large, high ceilinged classroom and was followed by the sudden commotion of bags, hands and movement. The trio waited for most of their fellow peers to leave the room before they left too, walking at a sedate speed. The hallway emptied out as students went to their various lessons and soon they were alone on their path.

Harry tensed when he felt two presences come up from behind and he glanced over his shoulder. Red-headed twins were running down the hallway to catch up to them and one shouted, 'Ron!'

Ron turned around with a frown, and as they stopped and panted, he asked, 'Who are you?'

Harry started when he heard the words leave his bonded's mouth. There was true puzzlement coming from Ron as he looked upon the two boys. But blue eyes rose up to the red hair on their heads and from the look in his eyes – it had dawned upon him.

'Don't you . . . remember?' Shock flowed with the words as one of the older boys spoke, 'It's us, Fred and George Zonko, well . . . used to be Weasley.' Both of them looked a little sheepish for some reason.

Ron stared at them, his eyes slightly wide, and they fell into an awkward silence. Harry noted how identical strange expressions came onto the twins' faces - eagerness, bafflement and nervousness

all meshed together.

'So, uh . . . Bill's working at Gringotts now as a curse breaker,' one of the tall, freckled boys said, an edge of hopefulness in his voice. Harry's eyes flickered down to Ron's hands and saw his fingers twitching. Living as long as he had with his friend, he knew his body language – it was not a good sign.

'He went to Hogwarts too – Head Boy, he was.' They both smiled brightly at Ron, as if he too should be proud. Nothing changed in Ron's expression, and their smiles dimmed somewhat.

Ron's eyes slowly went from one to the other, his fingers curling in slightly.

The twins suddenly looked uncomfortable and shifted from one foot to another uneasily.

'Um, so, what happened to you after-'

'Orphanage,' Ron said tightly, cutting him off.

Harry lifted an eyebrow at how oddly encouraged the twins looked because Ron spoke - the desperateness was indeed piteous. A few of Ron's fingers were bent inwards.

'We tried to find you – Bill, Percy and us, that is – but the records were amiss because the department was in chaos after the war.'

The next twin spoke keenly, 'So, how's Ginny? In the same orphanage as you?'

Harry and Hermione became still as Ron stiffened and his hands clenched into fists at his sides. Rage uncoiled and spread along the bond at a frightening pace.

'She's dead.'

Silence reigned, engulfing all the air.

'What?' the twin sounded breathless in his disbelief, 'How? Just how?'

Coldness seeped into Ron's eyes and he said flatly, 'I do not want to talk about it.' He turned, completely cut off, and he motioned for Harry and Hermione to follow.

'Ron, wait!'

The young red-head looked over his shoulder, 'No, we will be late for class.' His eyes hardened, 'As I have nothing more to say to you two – we will take our leave. Good day, mister and mister Zonko.'

xXx

For the next three lessons, none of them spoke.

Ron didn't open his mouth and his hands periodically tightened into fists under their desks. Hermione sat painfully still whenever she fingered her coverless book. They sat in the back of each class, utterly quiet as they worked and copied down notes. Harry didn't even try sooth his bonded, as they both were stuck in their minds and stuck in their anger. It was strange for the dark-haired boy – to be connected to others, but to be cut off at the same time. He could feel their anger, their confusion and rage as if it was his own, but at the same time it was oddly alien to him.

Side by side and silent – they walked into the dark, garlic-smelling classroom of Defence Against the Dark Arts. Professor Quirrell stood over his desk, welcoming his new class in a stutter. Harry pressed himself back in his seat as much as he could, to gather more distance between him and Quirrell – the sick feeling in his gut rising

up. The response was softer than before and Harry found he could tolerate it if he concentrated on his breathing.

Throughout the duration of the lesson, Quirrell stuttered more than he spoke. It was a task to piece together what the man said, but they managed and wordlessly agreed to share notes. Boredom spread across the class like a heavy-handed brushstroke, as well as disappointment, because frankly, the class was little more than a joke.

As he stared at the turban-wearing man before the class, Harry really wondered if he carried a Horcrux – by his demeanour and weak presence, it seem unlikely. But the feeling he had got – there was no mistaking it. Blind terror sheered it into Harry's mind and body long ago.

When the class ended, students shuffled out of the room with barely concealed yawns and drooping eyelids. As Harry shoved his textbooks into his bag, he saw Ron and Hermione walk under and out the arched doorway – both lost in thought. For a brief moment, he hated the fact that he felt alone and forgotten.

'Potter, stay a moment,' Professor Quirrell said, his voice strangely strong and clear. Harry's head jerked up and in the direction of the man's voice. The sickness rose up like a wave.

'Yes, sir?' Harry asked softly, his legs suddenly weak.

'Come here,' Quirrell commanded, pointing at the ground before his feet. Harry reluctantly came forth, his step unsteady. He couldn't not listen to that voice, that tone . . .

Quirrell stretched out a hand, a grin widening on his face, and everything inside Harry froze. He couldn't breathe; he couldn't move his body and his heart beat madly against his chest. Quirrell used a hand to push the dark-haired boy up against the wall with his fingers

wrapped around Harry's throat. Slowly, almost reverently, the man ran his fingertips along the young boy's face and finally, his lightning bolt scar.

Quirrell smiled, 'You remember, don't you? The way I taught how to want the pain.'

A whimper escaped Harry, just as the man's hand gripped black hair and tugged the boy's head to the side – exposing a thin, pale neck. Quirrell's eyes were tinged with red as he leant down and bit hard into the flesh. Harry could feel the skin break and as warm blood pooled around the wound – though the physical pain was nothing compared to one inside, which was slowly breaking him.

'I remember your screams, my pet, with startling clarity.' A tongue ran over the bite. 'You -'

There was a knock on the classroom door.

Quirrell immediately jumped back and his face changed dramatically. It was like he became a completely different person – sliding under one person's skin into another's. Constant uncertainty and apprehension clouded his eyes once more and his whole pose shifted.

'C-c-come i-in,' the Professor stuttered, his arms slid up against his body protectively.

Percy Weasley, a Gryffindor Prefect, strode in, 'Sir, I was wondering about the essay topic – can I . . . oh, sorry, were you busy, sir?'

Quirrell shook his head, 'I-i-it's f-fine, w-we were j-j-just f-finished. E-eh, P-P-Potter?'

Harry couldn't look up at the man and he nodded - his eyes so wide that they hurt. Without a thought, he fled the room and ran down the

hallways blindly. He had to get away, he had to get rid of the feeling of those fingers on his skin and . . . and . . .

He reached for the bond and followed its stretched form. At the end of it was where comfort lay, he was sure, he could feel it in his gut – the certainty and warmth! He stumbled and fell, but he got up again and ran as fast he could. Finally, he reached their quarters and he croaked out the password.

A few steps in, he fell to his knees and vomited all over the floor. He heaved up everything in his stomach and the bile that accompanied it. He felt weak and useless and sullied. He felt a burning warmth around and behind his eyes and knew that tears were threatening to come forth. The shaking that racked his body felt like it would never cease.

'Harry!' he heard Hermione cry out worriedly. She crouched down at his side and tried to touch him, but he flinched away from her hand. Ron ran into the room and stood next to him, concern flooding the bond.

'He's here! We have to kill him now,' he managed to hiss, his throat raw and aching.

'Harry-'

'No, can't wait-' Harry struggled up into a crawl.

'Wait, Harry. We have to plan this out – we can't be blamed for it or He'll win! I will lock this room till you are thinking straight, goddamnit!' Hermione looked like she was mere seconds away from slapping him.

Ron knelt down and grabbed Harry, pulling his into his chest. Harry fought, kicked and punched at his best friend – yelling hoarsely for

him to let him go, but the red-head silently held him. After a while, Harry stopped and became limp, succumbing to the exhaustion that overcame him.

'Okay?' Ron whispered, leaning back.

Harry closed his eyes and gave a faint nod.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Harry started telling them what happened. Hermione silently cleaned up the vomit with a cloth, not touching her wand as Harry froze when she made to grab it. He choked out the words, trembling and shivering with his arms encircled around himself.

'We . . . we should've been there,' Hermione murmured, her guilt wrapped in anger. Her breaths came out shakily as her fists tightened on her bent knees. 'We would've rather have died than let Him near you.'

Harry could hear the apology in her voice and he found that he was at loss as to how to reply, so he said nothing. Hermione hesitantly lifted a small hand and lay her fingers on the seeping bite on his neck. Harry flinched, but did not move away – instead, he raised his own hand and rested it upon hers. Slowly, without breaking eye contact with the girl before him, he pressed her fingers down against the wound firmly. His stomach lurched as the pain arrived, but it cleared his mind like a knife. The pain made him concentrate, swept his emotions aside and he could think. It was strangely calming and it was all right.

Abruptly, he realised what he was doing. Why was he clinging to the pain? Why . . . why? The words suddenly pierced him: 'The way I taught you to want the pain.'

His blood welled up in-between Hermione's fingers, staining the skin a deep red.

I want the pain for all the things I've done and for the things I will do.

xXx

'Since you three deemed it fine to miss two lessons today,' Severus Snape said slowly to the silent children before him, 'I am forced to give you a detention tonight for your dissatisfactory actions.'

Ron, Harry and Hermione nodded as one, their expressions formal and solemn. Harry knew that he was paler than usual and had red-rimmed eyes, but Snape merely glanced at him once and thankfully said nothing. Hermione's lip was bleeding again, but she did not move to clean the dripping blood away as they all stood straight and attentive. They could show no weakness in front of the man.

'You will clean today's cauldrons without magic.'

Without another word, they set to work with gloves, cloth and water. They were not daunted by the amount of cauldrons that were waiting for them as Durand had always made them clean his ones back in the shop as such. He claimed that if magic was used on the cauldrons, then the residues of magic would interfere with any potion made in them.

Around midnight, they finished their task. Snape watched them the whole time with dark, unreadable eyes and marked a pile of essays. There was a lot of red ink and rapid scratching of scrawl.

The hallways were deathly quiet and dark when they crept out. With their aching arms and feet, they walked in the direction of their rooms. They didn't get far from Snape's classroom as Draco Malfoy slipped out the shadows with Zabini and Parkinson a few steps behind.

'Ah, Potty, Weasel and Gangly,' Malfoy said with a smirk. 'What

brings you three out here late at night?' He put a finger on his lower lip in mock thoughtfulness, 'Oh yeah, you had detention for bunking.'

'Shut it, Malfoy,' Ron snapped, his hand curling into a tight fist. Hermione turned around as if to leave, but stopped when Malfoy spoke again.

'Oh ho, not pleased, are we?' The smirk widened, 'Well, it serves you right. You know,' he dragged out the words, '- they should have a rule that allows prefects and teachers to give detentions to mudbloods all the time – just because of their tainted blood and all. It makes sense, really. One doesn't know what that dirty blood has done to the brain . . .'

Parkinson sneered in agreement and said haughtily, 'It should become a professor's duty to make sure mudbloods don't run around rampant like the animals they are, I'd say.'

Zabini joined Parkinson and Malfoy in their chuckling.

Malfoy grinned and started to carry on in a loud whisper, 'Maybe we should invest in leashes . . .'

Hermione stiffened, spun round and punched Malfoy in the face. He yelled in pain and surprise, stumbling back. Hermione fisted her hand in his shirt and punched him again harder. There was a sickening crunch as her knuckles met his jaw.

'I will not take any more of your fucking shit-' she threw Malfoy to the floor and kicked him again and again. Her eye rose up and darted wildly from Zabini to Parkinson, 'Neither will I take your shit.'

Her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides jerkily.

Ron took a step forward and eyed Malfoy whimpering on the floor, 'What blood you have doesn't matter when it's splattered all over the

floor, you arrogant fuck.'

Malfoy crawled up into a crouch and used the wall to help him stand. Zabini and Parkinson did not move to help or defend him – they just watched from the shadows. Harry could almost feel the near-tangible waves of fear coming from them. Where was their so called and famous pure-blooded pride now?

'Wait until my father hears about this-'

Harry lifted his wand and pointed it at Malfoy. The blond went very still and glanced between Harry and the wand.

'You better listen, and listen well – we will not be taking any more of the shit that spurts out of your mouth,' Harry spat out with a barely concealed anger. 'We don't like one another and I highly doubt we will in the future – so stay the fuck away.'

The boy knew without a doubt that he would not be the victim anymore. Never again would he give in. He would bow to no man.

I have always wanted the pain . . .

Brisk, sharp footsteps sounded in the hallway and Severus Snape turned around a corner harshly to face them. His dark eyes reminded Harry of dark, cold tunnels as they dissected the scene before him. The potions professor's robes were so dark that seemed to meld into the shadows, though his sallow skin stood out contrastingly.

'What happened here?' Snape hissed, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

Ron tilted his head to the side and looked up at the professor with half-lidded, lazy eyes. 'Hermione bumped into Malfoy by mistake and they both fell, sir. As you can see, Malfoy landed badly and at awkward angles.' The red-head waved a hand in Harry's direction.

'Harry got a fright and drew out his wand, sir.'

Snape's gaze went from one child to next, slowly and deliberately. After a painfully long moment, he turned to Malfoy, who was leaning heavily against the wall for support.

'And why, Mr Malfoy, are you and your friends wandering around this late at night?'

'We were, ah, coming to your office to speak to you, sir,' Malfoy said quickly, 'It is of a delicate nature, so we assumed that you would be the best-'

'I made it clear, Mr Malfoy, that I do not appreciate useless queries. Go to the Slytherin Prefects if you have any problems, understood?' Snape drew himself up and frowned at the children before him. 'If I find any of you wandering around again after curfew I will be forced to take disciplinary action. Beds, now.'

As they walked away from the tall figure of Snape, Harry leant closer to Malfoy as they passed and whispered harshly, 'Remember, what happens in Slytherin, stays in Slytherin.'

Malfoy edged away from him and there was no mistaking the fear in his eyes.

I'll make them want it too.

xXx

Author's Note: woot! I managed to finish another chapter :) I'm actually proud of this one, even if it is a little on short side . . . I love writing evil scenes – as you can see. . . Anyhow, Ron's brothers are revealed! I'd like to hear what you think of how Ron reacted and perhaps, why you think he acted in the way he did. Though, don't worry – the Weasleys will be back later on in the story. Even Bill pops

up at some stage :)

In the next chapter, Padfoot2304, the reason why they were given separate rooms from their house is revealed. It had something to do with the fact that they are Experimental Section Victims . . . I haven't smoothed out the details as of yet, but there is a reason and I hope it isn't as far-fetched as you think it currently is :) Oh yeah, thank you for your reviews! I really appreciate them and I like how you say what you think – crits are always welcomed!

About Sirius and Remus – as Brookslocklear pointed out – they won't be in the story for a long time yet, sadly. I vaguely want to follow the original plot of HP, so they'll only appear maybe in second year or third at a stretch.

Before I forget, Quirrell and/or Voldemort are not vampires – old Voldie is just sadistic.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Chapter 16 – Override

There was a rustle of paper as Madam Pomfrey shifted her report into a straight, perfect pile with an ease born of many years practice. She stared at the flickering flame of her last candle on the edge of her cluttered desk and gave out a long, tired sigh. The moonlight seeped in through large, high windows above the empty beds in the Hospital Wing and crept into her office through the open doorway. Sometimes, she liked to sit and stare at the silver light as it stretched across the stone floor, adding to the eerily silence of her abode. But that night, she felt a sliver of dread and apprehension as she glanced out her door. She didn't normally like waiting, but for once, she hoped she would have to.

Ever punctual, Severus Snape's quiet footsteps entered her ears – his sudden dark shape tall and looming and slightly frightening in the dead half-light. The man stood for a moment in the doorway, his cold eyes darting to the old witch as she sat straighter in her chair. Without a word, Madam Pomfrey motioned him to sit down in the ready chair across from her.

'Good evening, Poppy,' Snape said a little stiffly as he sat down. 'Do you have the results?'

'I do, but . . . ' she peered at the sallow-skinned man carefully. 'I think I need to explain and discuss a few things though.'

Severus nodded slowly, though his grip on the edge of the arm rest tightened minutely.

'These children under your wing, Severus . . . tread lightly about them,' she murmured, fingering the side of the pile. 'I am not sure of the extent of the mental damage – but the physical shows much.'

Severus' dark eyes flickered to the pages in her hands.

'From the results of the tests . . . there is internal scarring within Mr Potter's rectum – which is evidence that he was raped at a very young age. And from the extent of the scarring, he was raped repeated over a long period of time.'

He closed his eyes and let his head drop slightly at her words, 'I know . . . I was the one that found him chained to the Dark Lord's bed.'

Pomfrey stared at him for a long moment unblinkingly, then said in a hard tone, 'There was no evidence on his initial check-up that he had been raped. They did not heal him for it. It's a near miracle that the boy has no sexually transmitted infections presently. ' She frowned at the top of her desk, 'But such negligence . . . I can't believe it.'

'I did not know that he was not treated . . . I just dropped him off at the tents and was called off to collect more children from the Labs. I did not know . . . ' Snape said, biting out the words with a shadow of bitterness.

'Make no mistake, Severus, I don't place the blame on you, but on my peers. I know the circumstances of that day very well as I too was there, but we have to deal with the consequences of those actions now.'

'I know,' he said, before he gave her a jerky nod.

She flipped over the page briskly, 'Mr Weasley has a long list of injuries. Multiple fourth degree burn scars on both his back and thighs, scars around his neck from repeated use of ligature strangulation, internal scarring of muscle tissue, tendons and ligaments . . . ' She looked up sharply, 'I smelled tobacco on his uniform and there is a extremely high amount of nicotine in his system, which suggests that Mr Wealsey smokes muggle cigarettes. Only his magic defends against the smoke damaging the total surface area within his lungs, but won't for long as he is approaching

adolescence.'

'I'll talk to their psychologist about it before I take action.'

The old medi-witch nodded before changing her page again. 'Miss Granger is a strange case. She refuses healing magic, so do not attempt to use it on her if there is the need - unless the wounds are serious, of course. She is the type to react violently if you disregard her choice. Understand, Severus?'

'There is a similar case in one of the higher grades in Slytherin,' he said, steadily placing his hands in his lap. 'I know what to do.'

'All right – Miss Granger had her right eye taken out and it was replaced with a transplant of some kind. The magic of it came up as unknown on the test, though it is not actively hurting her, so I strongly suggest that the risk of removing it is not to be taken because of the subsequent shock to her body. Surprisingly, all six eye muscles are intact and the optical nerve is twisted though still operational – but the girl says she still can't see anything. So, she is effectively blind in one eye.'

'Will she need therapy for it?'

'No, she was young enough to adapt to the change,' Pomfrey shook her slightly, 'Also, her bone marrow shows signs of slight mutation and I believe this is from the experiments done to Miss Granger in the Labs. She has rapid red blood cell replacement – making it almost impossible for her to suffer from blood loss.'

Severus shifted in his seat and said, 'A lot of children went through the same experiment – the Death Eaters wanted to have living blood banks for their soldiers after battle and in the hospitals.'

'I recognised the effects, not to worry,' she gave him a rueful smile, handing him the pile of papers. 'I need to you supply them with

nutritional potions for the next few months. Their counts are far too low to ignore. All the information you need is there.'

'Thank you, Poppy,' the dark-haired man murmured, slipping the pages into his inner robe pocket.

'No need, I'm only doing my job,' she said sadly, 'And in the end, it's the only thing I can do.'

'We all have our places, Poppy, and the fact you do something makes all the difference.'

She lifted her head and her lips quirked into a bitter smile, 'One can hope, old friend, one can hope.'

xXx

The sounds of many bubbling cauldrons drifted through the air, adding to the thick purplish haze that rose to the ceiling and settled there. Whispering voices quietly pierced the strange, busy silence of the classroom as the first years worked intently. Before all the desks and children, in the front of the classroom, sat Severus Snape. His back was almost painfully straight, his eyes narrowed each time he glanced up at his students suspiciously and his familiar sneer in place. There was a precarious pile of essays teetering on the side of his heavy wooden desk, and opposite there was another just as high with harsh, sharp scrawl in red ink smeared disdainfully all over the parchment.

Now and then, the man would reprimand a student or take off house points from Gryffindor as usual. But all in all, Severus Snape was slightly relieved that there had not been any accidents so far – which was a near miracle in a first year class so early on in the term.

Setting the poorly written essay he had been marking aside, he let his eyes rove the room and its inhabitants. Draco Malfoy and Blaise

Zabini sat in the front row together – they were proficient and had a confidence that most students lacked when it came to the art of potions, but the man knew that nearly all pure-blooded wizarding families employed a tutor for their children before school. Even on the first day it had become evident that the Slytherin side of his class was stronger in his subject and Severus couldn't help but feel a little smug.

Swinging his gaze to the other, Gryffindor side of the room – he noticed that the Longbottom boy was struggling with his potion. Severus didn't even try stop the spiteful glee within himself as he watched the Boy-Who-Lived add the wrong amount of ground porcupine quills with the help of his useless friend, Dean Thomas, at his side. It was always amusing and satisfying to see the perfect little hero fail where normal children succeeded – to see Longbottom complain and get angry to little effect. As Severus sneered at the brown-haired boy, he told himself that he was doing everyone a favour by deflating their hero's ego bit by bit.

By Merlin's name, its large enough anyway, Snape thought vindictively.

It was mostly by habit that he found himself watching the quiet trio at the back of the room. It fascinated the man at times how the three children flowed as one into their work and any task he set upon them. A mere glance or look between them took the place of any words shared – each knew their place with a strange clarity. Severus knew that, by far, Potter, Weasley and Granger had the best work ethic in the class, or the any of his students for that matter – they always handed in their assignments and potions at the exact right time and without complaint. Their potions were average, as they made the most obvious mistakes one could make – but Severus couldn't help but wonder how potent their work would be once they broke that barrier in the years to come.

But sometimes, the greasy-haired man mused over their sharp,

almost practiced dicing of the ingredients with silver knives. He couldn't help but wonder how they always knew the right answers without trying, almost as if they had stored it into their minds long ago . . .

But then he reminded himself that they were eleven years old and had lived as muggles for the majority of their lives.

With a stifled, tiny regret he wished that he could've harvested and moulded their raw talent at an earlier stage. If only he had checked the name of boy he had saved on that day long ago . . .

I have no time for regrets. I have to deal with consequences now of actions past.

'Potter, Granger, Weasley,' Severus called out, his elbows resting on his desk with his hands clasped together beneath his long nose. Three impassive faces rose to his. 'Stay after class.'

A moment later, the bell rang and students clambered to their feet. Commotion and noise followed in the children's wake as they left the classroom with relief evident on their small faces. Peering up, Severus saw three small shapes slowly, patiently pack their bags and lift them onto their shoulders. At times, the man had to strain to hear the clatter of their footsteps.

'Yes, sir?' Potter asked, standing in the middle with his friends at his side.

'I gave you the list of psychologists that were available a few days ago and you have not approached me in regard to whom you have chosen,' the man said, letting his arms fall to the surface of his desk. His gaze went from one child to the next deliberately.

'We have spoken about it, sir,' Weasley piped in, his hands stuffed into his robe pockets. 'We just haven't had the time, in-between

school-work and classes, to come and see you about it.'

Severus nodded once, 'Understandable. But do you three have your answer?'

'Yes,' Potter said in his strangely clear and almost flat voice, 'We would appreciate it if you contacted Mr Nathan Riley for an appointment later on this week, sir. Also, is it all right if we see him at Hogsmeade, rather than at school?'

'Why, Mr Potter?'

Potter shifted slightly, a mildly uncomfortable expression flitting onto his face. 'We . . . don't feel at ease speaking about our problems at school, sir.'

Leaning back into his chair, Severus stared pensively at the children before him before he said in a measured voice, 'I'm sure that it can be negotiated.'

He got three nods in reply and a 'Thank you, sir' from Potter.

As he watched them – Severus was gripped by the sudden, childish urge to use Legilimency on them. He wanted to see what was in the infuriately fragile minds they held and what they kept safe behind those solemn expressions. He knew their masks, but not what was underneath. As he suppressed the urge, he knew that he could not break past their protections, in fear of wrenching them away further than he could reach. It was a known fact that ES victims had natural protection from mind magics, due to the acts done to them – it was the natural, bodily reaction. That was why it was so difficult to rehabilitate war victims and abused children, since Legilimency was used in nefarious ways against them. The most notable one being torture.

'It's my duty to ask your psychologist if you three can live in the

dormitory environment like the other students in Slytherin. The other ES victims in your year are slowly moving from the private quarters given to them to their House. I need to know from a professional if you are ready – so is it all right if I ask him?'

'But why? Surely you don't need our permission?' Weasley asked with an air of curiosity.

'I do, otherwise your psychologist will not reveal the information I need, Mr Weasley. Now, before our time goes into your next lesson, I need to remind you that there is a group meeting this evening with Professor Sprout in the third antechamber off the Great Hall. It is compulsory for you three, as well as the other ES victims, to go. Am I understood?'

'Yes, sir,' Weasley and Potter chorused together, while Granger merely nodded her head without looking in Severus' direction.

'You are dismissed.'

As Potter turned away, his head tilted to the side and the top of his shirt slipped down his neck to his shoulder. A large, dark bruise surrounded a small wound on the boy's neck. Severus' eye widened slightly as he recognised the shape of it . . . teeth? Why in Merlin's name did Potter have a bite mark – a hickey – on him?

xXx

Harry placed his matchstick on his desk and stared at it. It was a very ordinary match, all wooden and imperfect. He felt no need to try to change it into a needle, as Professor McGonagall had ordered them to, and for a brief moment, he savoured the thought of simply refusing to do it. But as he noticed the strict Transfiguration teacher walking in-between the rows of desks – he lifted his wand and tried to look busy so she wouldn't berate him for a lack of effort.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione holding her match between her two fingers. She was frowning at the tiny piece of wood, and Harry could feel her frustration through the bond. Never had they need to change objects into something else completely, so what they were learning was utterly new. Of course, they knew the theory behind it, as Hermione had demanded that they read with her the night before, but they soon found that in practice it was much more difficult.

Hermione leaned back in her seat and swished her wand in the way they had been taught – but her match only pointed slightly. A shadow fell across them as McGonagall leaned over their desk and Harry unconsciously inched away from the old witch's presence.

'Mr Granger -'

'It's 'miss', Professor McGonagall,' Hermione cut in, her expression not changing. She swished her wand again, but the results stayed the same. The girl bit back a growl of annoyance as she rubbed her temple irritably.

There was a slight tinge of pink on McGonagall's cheeks, 'I apologise, M-Miss Granger.'

Hermione looked up and said in a forced bright tone. 'It's okay, Professor. A lot of people make the same mistake.' Harry nearly rolled his eyes when his bonded's smile came out more as small grimace.

McGonagall coughed, but soon her no-nonsense tone of voice returned as she peered through her glasses at Hermione's work. 'Your wand movement is very good, though you're forcing it too much, Miss Granger. Relax your grip a little.'

Hermione tried as she said and to her surprise her matchstick became silver, though it was still wooden at parts and flimsy.

Glancing up, Hermione said easily, 'Thank you, Professor.'

After a moment of watching Ron, Hermione and Harry at work, McGonagall asked, 'Have you three ever used Transfiguration before?' Her thin, grey eyebrow was raised in interest.

Harry stilled and glanced up at their professor, fixing a confused expression onto his face. 'No, we haven't. Why do you ask, ma'm? Is there something wrong?'

'No, never mind,' the woman shook her head dismissively, 'From what I've seen, you three are very diligent students. I hope you all keep up the good work.'

They nodded in reply and their professor strode off to a neighbouring row of struggling students. Harry breathed a small sigh of relief and relaxed his expression, before he turned once more to this matchstick. When they had used and studied transfiguration – they had only done partial changes. They had learned by themselves how to manipulate an object's shape, but not to change it completely – like from a matchstick into a needle.

As Harry swished his wand, he marvelled at the relaxed atmosphere of their new learning environment. When they had been under Durand Orexis' wing – they had to worry about being poisoned by their mentor, or by their very own creations. With Fere Asper, one had to be prepared to defend their very life when learning. They had always put their life on the line to gain knowledge . . .

Harry smiled as his match pointed.

If I had to tell people the many different ways one can die by a needle – I'd have a lot more to say in class.

xXx

Harry brushed his dark hair behind an ear, staring out the window before him in the corridor and watched as the sun sunk into the horizon. He pushed himself off the cold stone wall once the last beam of light disappeared, his arms still crossed against his chest and shirt. As he spanned the breath of the corridor, his robe fluttered after his heels and bounced off the movement of his legs. Without a backward glance, he heard two pairs of feet fall into step with his and the sudden contentment of the bond confirmed his followers' identities.

Harry stilled only to open the sturdy door in his way and he slipped in, holding the door back for a brief moment for his bonded behind. The large, open room that lay before them was well lit and filled with a circle of simple chairs.

With a quick glance, he noted that there were several other students milling about in tiny groups. Three Hufflepuffs, three Ravenclaws and a single Gryffindor. There were only first years. Harry frowned and they slowly walked closer, reluctant and unsure about being there.

'Gather round,' a plump, middle-aged woman called from the circle of chairs, 'Gather round!' Her voice was rich and warm, though filled with a certain fussiness that immediately seemed busy. 'Everyone take a chair each, please.'

Shuffling feet made their way to the centre of the room and they all sat down as asked. Harry, Ron and Hermione found the few seats that were the furthest away from the older witch, sliding in next to the group of Ravenclaws.

'Good, good,' the woman said genially, then she clapped her hands together with a smile, 'Hello, everyone. My name is Pomona Sprout. You many call me Professor Sprout, but I don't mind if you are more comfortable with my first name rather. Just don't let the other professors hear you call me that though!'

There were a few tentative chuckles and giggles at that, but they were soft and a little sad in the tense atmosphere. Sitting very still and utterly quiet, the Slytherin trio made no sound.

Sprout looked oddly encouraged by the general response and smiled once again. 'We are here today to start a relationship. One that I hope will help you all with the troubles you hold. We are here to simply talk, to open up and to let go. It'll take time, sure, but I want you to know that I will always make that time for you. Perhaps, within this group you'll find another that has faced the same horrors as you have and find that you can lean on each other because of it. The House divisions do not stand here, nor does prejudice – you are all simply people here. Whatever is said here - stays here.'

The grey-haired woman looked at each of their faces, 'Understand?'

There was an uncertain silence and the students glanced at one another. A Hufflepuff boy with straight blond hair and light brown eyes uncrossed his arms and lay them in his lap before he opened his mouth, 'Why should we speak to you, Professor? Why do you make us do this?'

'I had a son,' Sprout said quietly, looking down at her clasped hands – a flash of sadness in her eyes. 'He was killed in the war. He was only fourteen.' She brought her gaze upwards and it was resigned. 'After that, I saw the effects of Experimental Section on the children that were saved. I couldn't stand around and do nothing for those victims - those young, young children.'

'I'm sorry,' the blond Hufflepuff boy said after a long moment, shifting in his chair uncomfortably.

Sprout smiled sadly, 'You had to know,' she tilted her head to the side slightly, 'How about you tell us your name?'

'Zacharias Smith,' the boy replied, ducking his head a little.

'Well, Zacharias,' Sprout started, her expression and demeanour kind, 'Why don't you tell us about yourself?'

'Uhm . . . ' Smith glanced around nervously, 'I-I'm a Hufflepuff and . . . I like reading and playing exploding snap with my friends. I prefer being called just Zach.'

'Ah, who are you friends, Zach?'

'Justin and Susan,' Smith answered and pointed at a pale, shaking girl with a long plait over her shoulder and then at an almost haughty looking boy with a scar over his nose next to him. 'I only met them at Hogwarts, but we have fun.' Smith's cheeks coloured pink at his last words.

'It's always good to have friends,' Sprout said with another reassuring smile. She turned to the shaking girl. 'So, Susan, why don't tell us something about yourself?'

'M-my name is Susan B-Bones,' she stuttered, 'I like s-sewing dresses and c-clothes. I d-don't like being t-touched by p-people I don't know. It m-makes me r-remember.'

'That's okay, Susan,' the old woman said, 'We all have things we don't like. You just have to slowly learn to accept touch in your own way and to deal with the memories. It'll take time, but all of us are here for you, yeah?'

The girl nodded quickly and gripped the sides of her seat.

'So . . . you over there, next to Zach - what's your name?'

A Ravenclaw boy became painfully still and stiffened slightly, 'My name is Michael Corner, Professor. I am in the House of Ravenclaw and I'm a muggleborn. I like books and libraries.' He glanced up and

his eyes suddenly flared with a strange, almost eager and hungry defiance. 'I cut myself,' he said loudly as he lifted his sleeves up. Lines of scars ran across his lower arms – some thick and jagged, others thin and light. There seemed to be layer upon layer of scars, crisscrossing and unforgiving. 'I do it all the time with anything that's sharp, anything I can find.'

There was a deathly quiet silence as all eyes stared at the boy's thin arms stretched out before him. Susan Bones silently started to sob into her hands. Smith floundered at his friend's side, unsure as he reached out to comfort her, but stopped when she flinched away from his hand.

Another Ravenclaw boy held a resigned, bitter expression as he leaned forward and pulled Corner's sleeves down, hiding the startling, brutal truth. Corner sent a glare at the boy, but nevertheless sat back in his chair sullenly.

'Thank you, Michael,' Sprout said in a steady, measured voice, 'for sharing that part of you with us. I know for a fact, that cutting oneself is a very common way of expression one's inner hurt. Many children and students do, war victims and normal teenagers alike.'

'So, onto the next introductions,' she carried on, smiling again – though it was slightly forced.

The boy next Michael Corner looked up and said, 'My name is Anthony Goldstein. I like studying and school. I want to become Head Boy in my seventh year at Hogwarts.'

'It's wonderful that you have such a dream, Anthony. I wish you well.'

'I'm Terry Boot,' the boy with a burn along his jaw said next, 'I like flying and Quidditch.'

Sprout's gaze fell on Harry expectantly and nodded to him. The

dark-haired boy merely looked at her, straight in the eye unwaveringly, and did not move a muscle.

'Why don't you tell your name?' she urged after a moment of silence.

'Harry Potter,' he answered succinctly, then closed his mouth firmly.

Seeing that she would get no more out of Harry, she turned to Ron at his side. The red-head said his name flatly and looked at the floor. Hermione followed suit, acting strangely bland and acquiescent.

When the introductions finished, the bell that rang an hour before curfew sounded in the air. Professor Sprout sent them off to their dormitories, reminding them of the next meeting in two weeks time and with fond goodbyes. As soon as they could, they dashed out of the chamber and made their way to their quarters.

As they crossed the threshold into the dungeons, Harry let the disgust he felt with all his being seep into his expression on his face. His hands balled into fists and he felt like punching something, someone – preferable the stupid Herbology teacher and that stupid, weak boy who showed off his ill-earned scars. Harry didn't know why he was so bothered by the sight of those frail, scarred arms and what they represented. He had seen many scars before, even had a few himself, but this was different in a profound way . . .

It sickened him.

These meetings are just a pity-fest, nothing more.

xXx

Next to the crackly fire, Harry slowly tore open the thin envelope he had gotten that morning by owl post. It had been an ordinary owl, a barn one by the look of it, and no-one had noticed it when Malfoy's majestic eagle-owl stole all the attention.

Two letters slipped out of it and Harry opened the one done in parchment. It read:

Harry Potter,

Please warn me next time you send a uncouth muggle my way – I had to let the man search me for weapons before he'd even begin to talk to me, not to mention the way he threatened me as well. You know I dislike muggles, especially the type that have no manners whatsoever.

Anyway, my studies are well as they can be in your absence, though it has been marginally slower in progress. I need your replies for some of our friends – they have been missing you three terribly, though mainly Hermione as you know. The girl is very much loved, I can assure you.

Regards,

Durand

Harry stifled a chuckle as he read the first paragraph again – he could almost hear the plaintive tone within the writing. He nearly snorted when Durand mentioned their 'friends' – as if drug addicts and buyers were in anyway friendly and lovable when you didn't have more for them to use. Glancing up in the direction of Hermione's impromptu potion lab in the right room, he smiled.

It was a known fact that that the wards of Hogwarts searched the letters and packages coming in from the outside world – for dark objects and like. Durand had deemed it too risky to send in his products directly into the school, as they could be traced back to him. So, he had offered to bring the products into Hogsmeade and supply the student buyers there when they went on their weekend trips.

But, since Harry, Ron and Hermione were there; all the drugs could be produced within the wards without a problem – Durand mailed the ingredients to Hogmeade and they collected them from the Maker's agent stationed there.

His gaze fell and he picked up the other letter, the paper pure white and smaller than the one before.

Yo, you little monsters.

I still can't believe you three are in boarding school. I pity your classmates and more so, your teachers. I pray for them, that's for sure.

Don't miss ya,

Fere

Harry read further and found the information of their new job, written in code. After a few moments of deciphering it, he crumpled up the piece of paper and threw it into the fire with Durand's letter and envelope.

Standing up, Harry grinned and whipped out a dagger hidden at his lower back. He stared at the reflections of the dancing flames on the sharp steel – imaging the blood that would surely taint it once more, only to be cleaned away like so many times before.

xXx

The dark shapes and shadows of trees loomed all around them. A thin layer of mist hung about their ankles as they swiftly, silently padded their way through the trunks, the undergrowth flattened underfoot. Ron stopped now and then to hide their tracks and diverged off in another direction to make a false trail for any following, curious creature behind.

Harry stilled in a small clearing, absently pulling down his hood as he watched the knee-high grass sway in the cool night breeze. Hermione stopped at his side and peered up at the moon with a frown.

'We haven't much time,' she murmured, her gaze wandering the map of stars in the heavens with a critical eye. 'Are you sure the ward ends here?'

Harry gave a nod, peering over his shoulder at the darkness of the trees. Ron's small shape slipped out of the shadows a moment later and he took Harry's other side.

Ron took out his wand, 'We're out of the range. I can feel it.'

Without another word, they all apparated from the quiet, eerily still Forbidden Forest to an empty road on the River Thames, London.

They sped off the moment they touched the ground, still in the throes of their disorientation, and hid in a dark alleyway. The familiar sounds of traffic entered their ears as they crouched in the shadows, the flickering lights of the city welcoming them.

'God, long-distance apparation is a bitch,' Ron groaned, rubbing the side of his head.

'It's better than walking, you baby,' Hermione hissed as she peered around a corner. She turned to her bonded and said, 'It's clear – let's go.'

They crept along the series of warehouses, only hiding once when a guard walked by with a torch and a radio. When they came to Warehouse 42, they stopped at the side-entrance while Harry picked at the lock. Hermione used the time to load her pistol and to tighten

her belt.

'You guys know what to do – find and surround him. Cut off all exits if he runs,' she whispered softly, even gently. Ron gave her a knowing look – he knew her calm was like the calm in the eye of a storm – brief and deceiving, a false assurance.

The door clicked open and they went inside – all separating immediately upon entrance. Ron made his way up the stacked piles of wooden boxes to gain height and view. Harry secured the exit on the other side of the building, while Hermione stalked the winding paths in-between the boxes.

Silently, she let her black dagger slide into her hand. On the third turn, she heard heavy breathing and tensed, excitement filling her. She turned around the corner to see an old man with bald head and bloated belly. The moment he saw her, his little eyes darted to her dagger and he fled.

Hermione cursed, sending a wave of irritation through the bond.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a large hammer on the floor. An idea formed in her mind and she grabbed it before she sped on after her target. It was not hard to catch up – the man was making an awful amount of noise – sobbing and gasping and whimpering as he ran for his life.

The one-eyed girl herded the man into a one-way alley and suddenly Harry appeared on the other end, making the man stop abruptly. He let out a wail and tried to climb the boxes – but Ron stood above him with a pair of harsh, cold eyes. The old fat man stumbled back onto his backside and started begging for them to spare him.

'I give you anything, absolutely anything!' he wailed, his chubby hands clasped together and shaking. 'Please don't kill me!'

Hermione took a step to the side and swung the dull side of the hammer hard into the back of the man's head. Skin, muscle and bone shattered under the blow – the metal head of the hammer so imbedded that she had to tug it out with all her strength. Blood wept out wound and pooled around the still twitching body.

Suddenly, a bullet shot past – Hermione dodged it barely, the noise of it nearly deafening her one ear. Another shot rang out, followed by shouts and loud footsteps.

'Shit, we've been seen,' Ron called out over the roar of bullets. He hid with Harry behind a box high up. 'We got to get out of here!'

Hermione bit back a growl when a bullet grazed her cheek and she dived to where her bonded crouched. 'Apparate,' she hissed, holding her sleeve up to her cheek to stop the blood from dripping.

They disappeared with a small pop.

xXx

On the other side of London, Hermione watched as the fire produced from the tip of her wand burned and melted the bloodied hammer. She kicked the charred remains into a gutter, her gaze darting to the still, watchful figures at the mouth of the alley.

'The evidence is gone,' she said and kicked an empty, rusted can to the side. The adrenaline and thudding of her heart still had not left her.

Ron nodded, but frowned. 'You're still bleeding.'

Hermione ran her thumb along the open wound from the bullet and gave out a low hiss. Her fingertips felt and smeared the blood across her cheek harshly, tugging the flesh with them as her hand fell below her face. She stared at the upturned palm, her eye quivering and

filled with an intensity as she took in every detail of the blood.

'Ron,' she said as she looked up at him, 'Do you want to know why I fight? Why I hurt others and let myself be hurt in return?'

Ron's unreadable gaze flickered from her hand to her wound and to her eye.

'It's the pain,' she murmured, as if she was revealing a deep secret near forgotten in time, 'The pain of the physical overrides the pain of . . .' she hesitantly placed a hand over her heart- ' . . . here.'

She lifted her blood-soaked hand to her mouth, her tongue flickering out to catch some of the red stain on one of her fingers. 'Yes, the blood does sate me, as does the thrill of battle – but . . . at the bottom of it all, at the base of all my reasoning, that stark truth can't be denied.'

Harry felt an irrational surge of anger and spat out, 'You're no better than that Corner boy then.'

Hermione stilled, 'Perhaps I am, but we all use pain one way or another. I just don't stoop to that boy's low level, to that desperateness and uncontrollability.' She shrugged a shoulder.

Harry froze and stared at her.

Who am I to judge her? He thought bitterly. I actually want the pain that is given to me. I crave loss and ruin . . . the carnage . . . and the retribution.

Chapter 17 – It Is As Simple As That

Hermione pushed herself up against the wooden back of her seat and crossed her arms. The stitches along the healing wound on her cheek itched and she suppressed the urge to scratch at it. To busy her wandering mind, she watched as Harry wrote down a few notes on a scrap of parchment, his dark hair brushed behind his ears and his gaze glancing up now and then to look at the black-board. Snape was pacing up and down the front of the class, a piece of white chalk in hand, gesturing to the board and bubbling cauldron as he explained the theory behind the potion they were studying.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Draco Malfoy throwing bits of ingredients at a Gryffindor near him, while he and Zabini sniggered. It had only been three weeks since she had given the Malfoy heir his well-deserved beating, but as the bruises disappeared – so did the almost meek behaviour he had been displaying. Hermione had the urge, as she stared at the annoying blond, to show him again why he had been so quiet – to wreck his perfect pure-blooded exterior. As she pushed that urge away, she thanked the small mercy they had of Malfoy pretending that they didn't exist. It was easier to handle her anger then.

But to her relief, Malfoy wasn't the only one that was ignoring them. After the strange incident with Harry - what they could only surmise was that the piece of Voldemort in their professor had taken control briefly - the turban-wearing man couldn't meet their eye. As the days went by, the paler and more frantic Quirrell became. He was merely a shaking pile of limbs.

Serves him right – he's finding out the cost of being a host, no doubt, the one-eyed girl thought with a grim satisfaction.

The bell rang and Hermione fluidly rose out of her chair. She threw her books into her bag and pulled it onto her back, bringing her gaze to her bonded. Harry carefully blew on his parchment, to dry the new

ink, before he rolled it up and slipped into his bag. Ron was lounging against the edge of his desk, waiting with a bored look. Hermione could almost smell the cigarette that should've been perched in his mouth.

'Potter, Granger, Weasley,' Snape called from his desk and board. 'Come here.'

With a soft sigh, she swung round to head to the Potions Master, the others following up behind. They presented themselves before the sallow-skinned man side by side, as usual, as always. There was comfort in the normalcy, in the distance.

'Here are your daily nutritional potions that we spoke about,' Snape said, drawing out a box from his drawers. He flipped open the lid and within there were rows upon rows of tiny bottles. 'Each of you has to take one of these every day, preferably with a meal and in the morning. They may make you feel sick for a few days, but it'll pass as your bodies become accustomed to the supplements.'

'Thank you, sir,' Harry intoned. 'Once we're finished with these, do we have to come back for refills?'

'Perhaps,' their professor said uninterestedly, 'Your check-ups with Madame Pomfrey will decide that.'

Ron reached forward and took the box, his long arms surrounding the container as he lifted it to his chest for balance. 'Thank you again, sir. If you can excuse us . . . ? We have a lesson soon.'

Snape nodded, but his dark eyes were trained on Harry as he turned to go. The man reached past the small distance between him and the boy, wordlessly pulling down the collar of Harry's shirt to reveal his neck. A small, mostly healed bruise remained, but it was enough for Snape. A glance made the man draw back his hand and remain silent. Harry stiffly righted the neck of his shirt again, hiding the mark

upon his skin.

How . . . Snape thought, how have I failed them?

xXx

Steam and coloured fumes rose up and tumbled below the ceiling as Hermione leaned down, straightening her goggles as she did so. She peered down at the ground white powder critically, her dusty silver knife ready in hand and poised. She tsked softly, the sound only to be drowned out by the loud bubbling of a cauldron nearby, and pushed the knife onto a counter beside her. She grabbed a measuring cup and set to work, placing precise, exact amounts of the powder into plastic containers.

A small bell timed and she turned around, her gaze finding a simmering potion that had turned a rich navy blue. She pulled on thick dragonhide gloves and took a pair of tongs into one hand. Slowly, with no haste whatsoever, she dipped a tube into the potion at a distance and withdrew some of the substance. Once she firmly closed the tube and tucked it safely away in a cupboard, she banished the rest of the potion and took in a deep breath of air.

'Hermione!' Ron yelled into the room, his head poking out from a crack in the doorway. She glanced up, mildly startled. 'Hurry up, we have to go before the Library closes.'

Hermione pulled off her goggles and grinned, 'You didn't finish the Herbology homework?'

Ron scowled at her.

'I'll clean up here and drop the products off,' Hermione raised a hand when she saw Ron start to protest. 'Go with Harry and work. I'll be fine by myself.'

'But-'

'Ron.'

The red-head looked away, 'Okay, okay, you blind harpy.'

Hermione smiled, mirth dancing in her eye, 'Why, thank you for your co-operation, dear sir.'

Ron closed the door, mumbling under his breath about 'bloody witches and burnings at the stake.' Hermione chuckled as she heard the door click and she pulled her gloves off absently, leaving them with her goggles. Once she had cleared up the mess she had made in the process of making, she grabbed her jersey and left the room. Three containers knocked against each other in her pocket as she walked.

As silently as she could, she swiftly went through the dungeons and rose up into Hogwarts, up moving staircases and hallways. After a while, she stilled at a corner, her wand clutched in her small hand as she whispered a mild disillusion spell over herself. She snuck up to an old statue and placed the small containers within a small hidden crevice.

She waited for a moment, then turned and walked off. Once she was far enough from the corridor with the statue, she ended the spell over her. She couldn't have people wondering why she hadn't appeared again in this section of the castle after she had been seen there. She glanced up as she heard loud voices and did so just in time to see three Gryffindors – male and in fourth year. Cursing under her breath, she pressed onwards, not looking at them as they came closer.

'Hey, look, here's a little snake,' one of the boys sneered, leaning down to look at her. 'Aren't you a bit far from your filthy nest?'

Hermione didn't answer him, but merely stared back. She felt the first

stirrings of anger in her gut, but she schooled her expression. For some reason, the boys suddenly laughed at her.

'Look at it,' one boy gasped between guffaws, 'So fucking aloof.'

'Maybe we should teach the little Slytherin a lesson,' another said, grinning widely, cracking his knuckles. Hermione's mind worked fast. If this got out of hand, there was no knowing how badly she'd hurt them – she couldn't take the risk of exposing her level of expertise. But as she looked at the boy's untested fist, she had the burning need to fight, to feel the flex of her body and to hear the pounding blood in her ears. She wanted to feel and see their hurt.

Without another thought, she whipped her arm back and punched the Gryffindor in front of her in the stomach as hard she could. It was weirdly fascinating to the young girl heard the air be knocked out of his lungs and to see him fall to the ground like a lifeless doll. She could barely hear the yells of the other two because of the roar in her ears, but she felt the blows that landed on her. She kicked out as a counter, throwing the boy to the ground, while the other tugged her down to the floor – kicking, punching, scratching . . .

Out of no-where, a burst of red light – a stunner – hit one of the Gryffindors. Hermione rolled off to the side, crouched down defensively as her eye darted to the shadows. Another Stupefy spell careened through the air and knocked the last, panicked boy unconscious.

A tense silence filled the air. Hermione forced her breathing rate down and quietened it, so not to be heard by the unseen assailant. Her nerves tingled in awareness and readiness. Hermione slowly came out of her crouch and stood straight. She wiped the trickling blood from her nose with the back of her hand, then said in a low, dangerous voice, 'Come out, who-ever you are.'

To her great surprise, Blaise Zabini glided forward. His dark skin

melded with the shadows he half stood in and only the whites of his eyes and his slightly parted mouth stood out starkly against the darkness.

'Why?' Hermione asked coldly, as they stared at one another.

'You're a Slytherin.'

She couldn't stop the hollow laugh from escaping her, 'If that was enough, then why do you do nothing when your very own housemates hurt one another?'

'What happens in Slytherin, stays in Slytherin.' The sheer simplicity of his direct answer was astounding. She schooled her expression into neutrality, then watched him from her position. She wondered briefly how much he had seen, or if he had been following her . . .

'So true,' Hermione murmured, then gave out a heartless chuckle, 'Oh, the frightening double standards – the beautiful hypocrisy!'

Zabini frowned as she swung to him and said in a falsely sweet voice, 'Next time you want to be my hero, remember this - our housemates have said far worse things to me. Things more painful than any Gryffindor punch or kick. I'd take their fists instead of the mere sight of certain Slytherins any day, any time.' Hermione lifted her hand, her knuckles bloodied, and waved it dismissively. 'So leave me be. Just go. I don't need your help, or ever will.'

She parted her fingers on the other hand and levelled it before her, an unconcerned look fixing itself onto her face. She inspected her stained nails as she said, 'Tell all your little accomplices the same.'

Hermione stared at the boy's hand as it rolled into a fist through a half-lidded eye and as it tightly clenched at his side. A smile widened on her face as she watched him turn without a word and walk off down the hall, leaving her amongst the limp shapes at her feet.

I am one of three - I will always be so. No more, no less.

xXx

'Mione, you should've ran – that would've looked more authentic,' Ron said as they walked towards their next class. 'If you had done that earlier, then you wouldn't have had to use Obliviate on Madame Pomfrey and those boys.'

Harry absently checked the wide-range muffliato spell around them as he listened to his bonded as they spoke to one another. There were only three other students in the hall, at the corner end of it, but he steadied the spell nevertheless. One could never be too safe.

'You know how I am, Ron,' Hermione said sourly, 'So don't act all high and mighty on me.'

'Haha, funny,' Ron said in a dead-pan voice. 'You have to be cautious. Have you even thought of how we are going to deal with Zabini?'

'Of course I have, you dumbass!'

'Good, you're thinking – that's more than I expected.'

Hermione's eye twitched and she looked close to punching the red-head at her side, but they all froze when someone called out from behind. Harry immediately cancelled the spell around them with a subtle, hidden flick of his wand within his sleeve.

'Wait! Ron, wait!'

Tugging red hair back, Ron's expression tightened as his whole body tensed. Loud, almost frantic footsteps followed him as he carried on walking down hallway, not looking back. At his side, his bonded became silent and glanced his way, their faces wiped clean of

expression. They all knew those two voices.

'Please, Ron! Just let us-!'

Ron stopped suddenly, his shoulders slightly hunched and his fingers started curling into fists. The boy turned sharply and faced the tall, red-headed twin that had plagued his steps, like so many times before.

Hermione shivered slightly as she felt and saw the abrupt change in her friend.

'How may I help you, Mr Zonko?' Ron bit out harshly. 'What will it be today? Will you demand again to know of things you are not privy to?'

'What the hell, Ron . . . we're your brothers! Why are you acting like this? Why are you being so . . . so . . . Slytherin?!' one of the twins near shouted, an aching, uncomprehending pain showing in his eyes and face.

Ron stiffened almost painfully. His mouth twisted into a sneer and cold disdain filled his voice as he spoke, 'We have the same blood flowing in our veins, but that does not mean you can intrude on my life or ask personal questions. It does not mean we have to be any semblance of friends.' His blue eyes were like ice as he spat out, 'Make no mistake, dear sirs – there is no bond between us.'

Turning on his heel, Ron said over his shoulder with red strands covering his eyes, 'If either of you come near me again with the same meaningless intentions – I will not hesitate to kill you both.'

Harry and Hermione's gazes shot to their bonded's rapidly, frowns etched onto their faces. Ron tilted his head indifferently to the side, his jaw pushed out slightly in defiance as he stared back at their looks of disapproval. He took a step forward, but stilled when he heard a soft, pained voice from behind.

'Fine. But, at least, tell us what happened to our little sister.'

The twins couldn't suppress the instinctual flinches as Ron's gaze fell on them once more. Dead, empty eyes stared back at them. Those eyes spoke volumes and of things the small boy in front of them could never put into words.

'She asked me to kill her. I did.'

Ron's shoulder shook as he looked down at his trembling fists. His auburn hair hid his face from view and took his torment from their eyes. 'Just . . . leave me be,' he said quietly. 'I want . . . nothing more.'

The twins couldn't answer, they opened their mouths, but no words left them.

Each step he took from Fred and George widened the gap already between them – pulling them further away, till the meagre bridge they had crumbled. As he followed his bonded, Ron closed his eyes, washing the twins' stunned faces from his mind.

Let it be nothing more.

xXx

'Once the carriage has stopped, you'll be at Hogsmeade. Follow the path till you find an inn called The Three Broomsticks and Madam Rosmerta will be there to welcome you. She knows you three are coming,' the cold voice of Severus Snape said as he stood stiffly out by the pebbled road. The man looked completely out of place next to the shedding trees and red leaves underfoot, so artificial next to the organic. 'Are you sure you want to go?'

Harry could see the man was pained as he said it and the boy was sure the words were forced, seen as nothing more than an

unavoidable necessity. Harry looked at the man, then glanced at the skeletal, reptilian horses hooked up to the carriage they sat in. 'Sir, what are those?'

Snape seemed startled that he had pointed it out, a little saddened too, but he answered promptly, 'Those are Thestrals. Winged horses that are invisible to those that have not seen death.'

Harry gave a deep nod, his eyes still trained on the horses as he said, 'Thank you, sir. We'll go and be back before sunset.' He could already feel Hermione's interest in the strange creatures and hid a smile.

'Come to my office before you retire to your rooms.'

'As you wish,' Harry answered, suppressing a sigh.

The carriage and Thestrals trotted off down the small road, along an avenue of trees that curved inward over it protectively. Red, orange and yellow leaves coloured and covered the ground beneath the trees as morning light seeped in through the bare branches above.

'It would be so much quicker if we could apparate right now,' Hermione mumbled under her breath, sitting cross-legged on the seat.

'Sometimes speed at which things are done is not important and patience is wise,' Harry said politely, quietly, as he stared up at the cloudy sky overhead. It would not rain, but the clouds were thick and grey and oppressive. Only small bursts of the rising sun's light managed to filter through to earth.

Silence reigned as Thestrals guided them to Hogsmeade – Hermione scowling into the middle-distance, Harry pensive and Ron stuck in his own brooding thoughts. The red-head had been quiet since the day before, since he had spoken to the Zonko twins for,

what was in his mind, the last time. Harry and Hermione left him to his thoughts, silently suffering him hiding his emotions from them and the bond.

They jumped off the carriage at the train station and made their way to the village not far from there. A well-worn stone path showed them to their destination and they slipped into the little village of Hogsmeade. They had to make an effort to look lost and bewildered, even though they had been in the little village many times before. Ron stopped and asked a villager where the inns were.

'Just follow this cobbled road, lad, and you'll see it – you can't miss The Three Broomsticks.'

A chilly wind swept through the streets and they found their destination just as it was strengthening. A witch welcomed them inside and led them to a private room above the bar that was next to the rooms one could use for a night.

'Mr Riley is inside,' Madam Rosmerta said kindly, 'Come down when you're finished so I can treat you three to something, okay? Maybe a butterbeer, perhaps?'

They thanked her with wide smiles and she left them with a little chuckle, her apron rustling as she made her way down the wooden staircase. Once the woman was out of sight, Harry knocked at the door tentatively and they all took a step back. As they waited, they subtly changed their demeanours as they had been taught. Ron's change was almost instant, while the other two took the time given to slowly incorporate the revealing signs of their body language.

'Ah, come in,' a deep, calm voice said from behind the door. 'The door is unlocked.'

Harry took the handle and pulled it down, only to be welcomed by a wave of warmth as the door swung open. A crackling fire danced in a

small grate at the back of the room, while all the windows were closed and covered by thick curtains. In the middle of the room, a man sat in a big red armchair with his legs crossed. His light brown eyes peered over his rectangular glasses at them, a hint of a smile on his wide, generous mouth.

'Hello,' he said warmly and he gestured to an empty couch a little way from him, 'Come, sit with me.'

Harry and Hermione sat down as ordered and did so stiffly, showing their unease and tension. Ron faltered, looking scared as he glanced up at the man, then at the floor.

'Are you all right?' the man asked, a small frown on his face. 'Do you not want to sit down?'

Ron nodded jerkily, his eyes not leaving the ground.

'That is okay – I don't mind. You can sit or stand where ever you want, lad.'

Slowly, slightly unsteadily, the red-head walked forward and found a place near the arm of the couch. As Harry glanced at Ron, letting a false worry fill his expression, the dark-haired boy couldn't help but feel admiration at Ron's acting skills. His friend could manipulate those around him with one planned and calculated look. He had the man wrapped securely around his little finger already.

'Well, I'm Nathan Riley,' the man said with a reassuring smile that directed mostly at Ron. 'I'm a psychologist and have been so for many, many years-'

'Sir, can you-! Your . . . w-wand . . . ' Hermione blurted out with a stutter, then paled and hid her face behind her hands. 'I'm sorry! I didn't mean . . . it. Sorry . . . '

Nathan Riley smoothly took out his wand and placed it on the small coffee table next to his armchair with a gentle smile. 'I don't mind in the least. After all, I'm here to help you.'

'Mr Riley, can people hear things through the door or the walls . . .?'

Harry asked, then bit his lower lip and trembled slightly.

'No, they can't. I placed a ward around the room - I will always do so, in the course of our sessions together. Is that all right?'

The green-eyed boy nodded shyly, then gave a little smile. 'Thank you, sir.'

'Call me Nathan,' the man said as he poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher. 'And what can I call you-'

Whipping his wand out from beneath his cloak, Ron whispered harshly, 'Stupefy.'

xXx

Harry tightened the last knot of the rope, then carelessly pushed the tied up body of Nathan Riley back into the red armchair he had sat in. Hermione stood up from her crouch, after securely tying the man's feet and hands together – his wand slipped behind her ear as she hummed happily.

'Secure?' she asked, glancing at Ron, who sat on the couch and was staring at the fire thoughtfully. He gave her a small nod after a moment, then straightened his back and brought his gaze to the knocked-out man across from him.

'Wake him,' he murmured as he rubbed his temple tiredly. 'Let's get this over and done with.'

Hermione pouted, but said the spell, 'Rennervate.'

It took the man a full minute to groggily lift his head. He glanced between them uncomprehendingly with his glasses barely on the tip of his nose. He looked down at the ropes around him that limited his movements and a stricken expression flittered onto his face.

'What? What is this?' he asked hurriedly, his words slightly slurred.

'We have a proposal for you, Mr Riley,' Harry said coldly, crossing his arms. 'You don't have much choice in it. We can either kill you now, or you can agree to our demands.'

'I-I don't understand . . . what is happening? I . . .'

'You are fucking tied up, you arsehole,' Hermione bit out with a scowl, 'Are you getting the idea that we're holding you against your will or not?' She turned to Ron. 'Can I beat him up a little, please? They always listen better then.'

'Hush, Mione,' Ron said quietly, without looking at her. He took her hand in his as Harry carried on.

'If you don't want to die, Mr Riley, I suggest you listen well.' Harry tilted his head to the side indifferently. 'We want to be able to dictate whatever you put in the reports you send to Hogwarts about our status. If you agree to this 'proposal' we have for you, then you cannot tell, hint, write, indicate, use sign language or show memories to anyone, or to any soul, about this agreement or what is going on between us.'

'And if I don't . . .?' Riley managed to ask as a droplet of sweat fell down the side of his face.

'Then the curse we have placed upon you will slowly and excruciatingly make your heart muscle rot. Understand?'

Riley's eyes widened, 'I . . . I don't believe you!'

'Must've been a Gryffindor . . .' Hermione muttered under her breath disdainfully and Ron squeezed her hand to quieten her.

'You can feel it, right?' The dark-haired boy smiled widely, 'It's in your very blood – a tantalising secret and threat. Ah, you're sweating in fear already. Don't try lie to us, sir,' Harry's voice lovingly caressed the air and made the man shake in the clasp of ropes.

Harry shrugged after a tense moment, 'But, if you want to test out that curse . . . be my guest, Mr Riley.'

'Why . . .why me?' the man choked out, his eyes brimming with frustrated tears.

Hermione grinned and slipped off the couch. She glided forward gracefully and leaned down, bringing a hand to his jaw. She trailed a finger down the length of it till his chin and whispered breathily, 'We wanted a toy and you were easy to get. It is as simple as that.'

xXx

Author's Note: muwhahah! You guys have no idea how long I've waited to write that last scene –evil grin- Sorry that this chapter is a little rushed and bitty, but I just had to get it out so I could carry on with the next chapter . . . hehe, the next chapter is pretty cool, if I say so myself. Let's just say that First Year is nearly finished! Probably in another chapter or two, yeah.

I would like to thank Pixelized Smile and Makurayami Ookami for their many reviews! And of course, to every other reviewer too, who have given me such cool comments and spurred me to write more :) Thank you!

Chapter 18 – Beyond This All

The full glory of the night sky flickered brightly beyond the small, uneven spaces between the leaves overhead. Twisting branches spread themselves outward, high up and down below. A flowing silence encompassed everything, only to be pierced at moments by the rustling of leaves in a small breeze and a deep howl far off. With one small hand on the gnarled trunk and the other limp at her side, a one-eyed girl stood balancing on a branch in a tree. Her head was tilted upwards as she looked upon the heavens unrestrained and in silent awe.

The stars have always been, she thought wistfully.

Her nails dug into the wood and she ignored the pain that shot through her hand. Her mouth parted, her dark brown eye wide and searching. The stars seemed naked in the dark sky above, stripped of their safety from scrutiny and so very far away from one another, so much so that they seemed alone. But they were not vulnerable, she was sure of that. They were many, they were strong and they were ancient. She had always liked them because of that.

It's like they will never fade.

Even though she knew that they would one day, she couldn't stop feeling the raw intensity of the life they represented – of the overwhelming possibilities. She lifted her hand and reached out to the stars. As her hand closed, she grabbed nothing but air – but in her mind's eye, she had galaxies and a thousand suns within her grasp.

With a sigh, Hermione lowered her arm and looked down. The ground was close and she jumped down agilely, disturbing a thin layer of mist that hung over the earthy floor. By the trunk of the tree, in and amongst the chaos of its roots, lay a heavy backpack. Hermione hefted it onto her shoulders and set off, minding the

undergrowth as she walked.

The looming trunks of the trees surrounded her as she placed one foot in front of the other, heedless of her presence, of her disturbance in their natural realm. She slipped silently through them – relishing in the open freedom of moving as she wished. There was no-one to notice her skilled steps, her unguarded expression and trained composure. She let her body's instinct take over as she crouched down and flexed and moved her muscles.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a golden, bobbing light float through the darkness and Hermione darted behind a tree. She concentrated on her hearing, straining its sensitivity – there was breathing! Hermione poked her head out and saw a fleeting glance of a huge, bearded form. It was Hagrid, the gamekeeper and half-giant.

Hermione listened to the loud, clumsy footsteps, noting that the half-giant wasn't alone. There were four others. Four small shapes. What was the half-breed doing? There was a slight drone of voices, but she was too far away to make sense of any of it. Hesitantly, suspiciously, she edged closer – hiding behind the tree trunks as she went.

'-now, listen carefully, 'cause it's dangerous what we're gonna do tonight an' I don' want no one takin' risks. Follow me over here a moment,' she heard Hagrid say from a distance and as he lifted his lantern high, she caught a glimpse of Seamus Finnigan's face next to the half-giant. Hermione frowned.

What is the half-breed doing with students in the Forbidden Forest?

'Look there,' said Hagrid, 'see that stuff shinin' on the ground? Silvery stuff? That's unicorn blood.'

Hermione stifled the gasp that nearly fled her lips.

'There's a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat.' The half-giant carried on, crouching down. 'This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We're gonna try an' find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery.'

Her eye widened as the information settled in her mind. Unicorn blood was a very unique substance that any potion-maker would kill to get their hands on. A drop of the silvery blood of a unicorn was beyond rare because of its intense magical properties.

If I could collect some . . . Hermione grinned toothily, an eager hunger filling her.

'And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?' asked a fearful voice that Hermione immediately recognised as Draco Malfoy.

A Slytherin and Gryffindor? Is this detention . . .? The fools! The Forbidden Forest is no playground!

'There's nothin' that lives in the Forest that'll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang,' Hagrid said confidently and Hermione had to suppress the urge to snort. She knew for a fact that a desperate werewolf would have no qualms in attacking wizards or even a half-giant. That is without bringing those agro Centaurs into the equation. What the hell were those teachers up in the castle thinking? Did they want to have dead children on their hands?

'Right, now, we're gonna split inter two parties an' follow the trail in diff'rent directions. So me, Dean an' Seamus'll go one way an' Draco, Neville an' Fang'll go the other. Remember, send up red sparks if yer in trouble, yeah?'

Hermione's hands clenched into fists and she forcefully calmed her breathing. The anger made it hard to breathe. She couldn't believe it – the half-breed seriously thought those children would be safe by themselves in a place that housed the most dangerous creatures

known in Britain. Had his tainted blood marred his logical, human thinking?

For a moment, Hermione was torn. Should she go back to the castle as planned? Or should she follow her follow classmates? She gritted her teeth as her nails dug into the skin of her palms. Her foot took a step forward and she took in a deep breath, glancing up at the disappearing backs of Malfoy and Longbottom. A frustrated hiss left her and she shrunk the backpack with a wave of her wand – slipping it into her inner jacket pocket as she silently padded after them.

As she danced along the narrow path, stepping around the brittle undergrowth, she followed Malfoy and Longbottom deeper into the Forest. As Hermione listened, the silence seemed wrong to her and the darkness before them too black. Without a thought, she pulled her eye-patch back till it was beside her ear, against her flattened hair.

'Look-' she heard Longbottom murmur, holding up his arm to stop Malfoy.

The one-eyed girl slid to the nearest tree and climbed up a few branches to gain height and a clear view of what was before her. On the ground, the limp corpse of a unicorn lay amongst the fallen pine needles, its silvery blood pooling around it. Long slender legs stuck out at odd angles and its pearly white mane splayed out around its head like a halo.

Suddenly, a low bush quivered. Hermione's hand shot to the dagger strapped to her thigh and gripped the handle. A hooded figure slithered out of the deep shadows and crawled to the prone body of the unicorn. It lowered its head and from the sounds, Hermione knew it was sucking the blood from the unicorn's wounded side.

Malfoy suddenly let out a terrible scream, and fled with the dog and lantern. The hooded figure lifted its head at the sound and looked

straight at Longbottom, silvery blood dripping down its front. Hermione swore under her breath as the figure shot forward, towards the Boy-Who-Lived, who stood frozen in his fear. Hermione whipped her arm back and up over her head, throwing her dagger as hard as she could.

An inhuman scream erupted from the hooded figure as the dagger pierced its side. Hermione withdrew another blade from her person within a single breath and readied herself. She glanced at Longbottom, only to see the boy's face as a mirror of pain as he staggered backwards. Shoving her inhibitions aside, Hermione jumped down from the tree, the flat of her blade pressed against her breast. She landed and crouched down defensively and poised just as the figure turned to her. The girl let her wand slip into her free hand from its holster strapped to her wrist.

She threw a stunner at the figure, which it dodged, and she shot forward. They clashed – steel against teeth and claw. The moment they came into contact, she knew that there was magic on it – to hide its face and subsequently, its identity. As she flipped backwards, she shot a basic counter-spell at it and it bounced off cleanly. At that moment, as her feet hit the ground, she saw an opening and she threw her blade – up to its hilt, it slid deftly into the figure's upper leg.

Another chilling scream left the figure and it crumbled into a heap. Hermione grabbed her pistol and took off the safety without hesitation, then stalked forward to the cloaked shape. She kicked its hood off with a muddy boot and the spell collapsed partially. The distorted, ravaged face of Quirrell came into view for a split second, before the figure abruptly recoiled, pulling the hood over his head as he stumbled back. Hermione lifted her gun, but suddenly, the figure disappeared into the shadows in a mere blink of an eye.

The girl pulled the trigger too late. The crack of the shot resounded loudly as the bullet flew in the air, but did not meet its intended target.

Hermione drew in a haggard intake of air as she lowered her gun. After a moment, she looked down at her hands and noticed that they were trembling against the metal. She watched the quivering tendons move under the skin of her hand as her breathing evened out once more and the shock left her body.

A clattering sound entered her ears and she whipped round, pistol ready. What could only be a centaur came into a ray of moonlight – it had white –blond hair and a palomino body. Pale blue eyes were on her as she gritted her teeth and steadied her footing.

'You fought well,' the centaur said mildly. 'Are you all right?'

Hermione lowered her gun slightly and eyed the half-man, 'I am, presently.'

The blond centaur gestured to the shape by Hermione's feet. 'He is the Longbottom boy. It is not safe for him to be here, especially now. That which you fought, the man-who-is-not-a-man, is his mortal enemy.'

'I know this,' Hermione murmured, glancing down at the fainted form of Neville Longbottom. 'That monster is my enemy too.'

The centaur threw back his head, 'Mars is bright tonight.'

Hermione's gaze followed his and nodded, 'So it is.'

The centaur looked down and a resigned sadness crept onto his face as he gazed upon the dead unicorn. 'Always the innocent are the first victims. So it has been for ages past, so it is now.'

'Innocence is but a fleeting stage of life,' Hermione said, bitterness hardening her voice. 'Innocence makes one weak – that is why they are killed.'

'Perhaps,' the centaur replied airily. 'Even so, innocence will always be treasured.'

'That is because of the cruelty of this life is a truth too hard to face.'

A long, tense moment ran after her words. The centaur lowered himself and lifted Longbottom's body to his chest. 'I will take him to Hagrid, white-eye. I will not tell of our meeting and the boy will not know of your presence this night.' He looked heavenwards. 'That is what the stars have foretold. And it will be so.'

Hermione cleared her face of emotion and said simply, 'I will kill you if it is otherwise.'

'I do not doubt that, white-eye.' Without another word, the centaur galloped off.

Hermione watched the half-man, half-horse till he was out of sight. With a weary sigh, she knelt down next to the unicorn and gently closed its eyes, one after the other, with two fingers. She looked up to the stars as she straightened.

Mars is unusually bright tonight – why didn't I take notice?

xXx

'Hey, can I have some?'

Ron gave Hermione a side-long glance, mildly curious, as he leant against the stone wall of the corridor. He lifted his hand a moment later, a cigarette held gingerly between his index finger and thumb.

She took it and murmured, 'Thanks.'

He watched as she lit the cigarette with his smiley-face lighter. 'You all right?'

'Yeah,' she said lightly, then blew out a cloud of smoke. She pressed her head to the wall and tilted it back. 'Yeah, I guess so.'

'Is it about last night?' he asked quietly, 'About what you saw?'

A hard smile stretched on her face, 'Maybe.'

Silence rolled around them as the distant sounds of the school echoed faintly along the hallway. Ron tentatively searched the bond and sent a slither of calm along it to her, hoping to help her clear her thoughts. Hermione's eye lightened and the corner of her mouth curled upwards. The look she gave him was of tenderness and understanding.

'Oh, yeah,' she said suddenly, looking at the cigarette in her hand. 'How is your little liberty suiting you?'

Ron grinned, 'Mr Riley did well in convincing them.'

It had been two weeks since they had cursed the psychologist in Hogsmeade and the man had held true to their 'proposal.' It had been Hermione's idea to get Nathan Riley to allow Ron to smoke legally on the school grounds between and after lessons. All the trouble was worth it and it had been amusing how stubbornly the teachers had fought this concession – even in the face of Dumbledore agreeing to it immediately.

'Though nothing will change Madam Pomfrey's mind,' Hermione said and both of them chuckled.

Across the span of the hallway, the door to the Library opened and Harry strode out. His green eyes were bright as they fell onto his bonded, a large book in his arms. He rushed over to them – his mouth forming the words to cast a privacy charm around them.

'I found it!' he gushed out, opening the book. 'It's actually here, in Hogwarts.'

Hermione slid up next to the dark-haired boy and peered at the book. 'The Sword of Gryffindor?'

'They say that the Headmaster of Hogwarts is always left with it to safe-keep,' Harry carried on, turning a page. 'That means it's with Albus Dumbledore.'

'Dumbledore?' Ron's eyebrows rose. 'How can he be holding a Horcrux?'

'Well, we can't be sure that it is one until we see it,' Harry murmured, 'We're only sure of Helga Hufflepuff's Cup and Salazar Slytherin's Locket.'

'Plus, even if the Sword isn't a Horcrux – it is a powerful magical weapon that may be able to destroy the other Horcruxes. We need it, heedless of its condition,' Hermione mused, as she ruffled up her spiky hair with a hand.

'I agree,' Harry said, closing the book.

'Mm,' Ron rubbed the bridge of his long nose thoughtfully, 'Perhaps he has it in his office?'

Hermione frowned, 'That'll make things a little tricky . . . '

Ron made a face at her, 'Those wards we sensed around Dumbledore's office were crazy, remember? Layer upon layer, like a fucking onion. That place is too tightly warded for us to sneak in and out undetected.'

'We're just going have to work something out, dumbass,' Hermione said derisively. 'Stop bloody well complaining.'

As Ron was about to retort, Harry looked up sharply and covered the red-head's mouth with a hand. His eyes were narrowed as he tore down the privacy charm around them. Without warning, he cast a Disillusionment Charm over them and a trickling cold fell down their backs from their heads.

Harry lowered his arm to his side, then beckoned them to follow him. Hermione and Ron trailed him silently, and they slipped out of the hallway and into the courtyard by it. Under one of the trees, sitting on the bench, sat Neville Longbottom with his two best friends – Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan. Their young faces were intent and serious, which surprised Hermione greatly.

'It has to be Snape, guys,' Longbottom whispered, 'You both saw the bite on his leg that night we followed him to the Third Floor. Then that time my scar burned when he looked at me . . .'

Third Floor? Isn't that level forbidden? Hermione thought as she crouched down next to her bonded.

'Come on, Nev, Fluffy would bite anything that enters through that door. He's a bleeding three-headed dog!' Seamus Finnigan said urgently. 'I really think we shouldn't involve ourselves any further. It could be dangerous!'

'It'll be more dangerous if Snape gets the Philosopher's Stone! Think of what will happen if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named got it!' Longbottom said, 'We have to stop him. We have to . . .'

'Then we must go to Dumbledore,' Dean Thomas cut in. 'He'll know what to do.'

'You said it yourself, Dean, we need more information and proof before we can go to them. They won't believe us if we have no evidence, especially as Snape is a professor like them. . .'

'Guys, we've got Potions in a few minutes, we better go,' Dean said suddenly, checking the time with his wand. 'Snape will take points off if we're late again.'

'He always takes points off . . .' Longbottom grumbled. 'He'll take house points just because I breathe. Just watch, he'll do so one day.'

'Aw, mate, it won't get that bad . . .'

'Oh yeah, sure,' was the sarcastic reply.

xXx

The sky was darkening as the day approached the conclusion of sunset, the stretches of thin clouds high-lighted by the dying radiance. Hermione spread out on the grass on her back under a tree near the lake. Ron sat by her side, an elbow resting on his knee as he smoked a cigarette and Harry leant against the trunk of tree with a book in his lap. The one-eyed girl turned her head to the side and looked at the slightly swaying grass strands moving in the breeze – inspecting the yellow that tainted the green of the grass with an interest born from lethargy.

When she peered up from the grass that tickled her nose and skin, her gaze rose to the impressive shape of the castle. It appeared very far away from the side of the lake where they had relaxed for nearly the whole afternoon – it was a nice distance, making her feel like she was an impassive observer of a place she had never seen before. For a brief moment, it was like she had not lived in the castle at all for these last few months.

She closed her eye and sighed, letting her body soak up the last heat of the daylight. She nearly sunk into a doze, but froze in sudden awareness of her surrounding when she heard grass crunch under a pair of feet.

'Ron?' a desperately hopeful voice asked quietly from a small distance away. 'Is that truly you?'

Hermione sat up, just as Ron turned to the person that had spoken. A tall man with long red hair and one fang-earring looked at Ron imploringly, a little disbelievingly. He looked like he had seen a ghost of a person he had least expected.

'Bill! Come on! Please, we told you not to . . .!' another voice shouted and Hermione saw the Zonko Twins running to them. They stopped at the tall man's side, breathless and both wearing apologetic expressions that were aimed at Ron.

'Please, Bill . . . We told you the situation. Leave him alone,' one of the twins said pointedly.

'Bill, please, listen to us . . .' the other twin murmured.

'Ron,' the man said in a hard voice, 'What the hell happened to her?'

The young red-head stiffened as he stared emotionlessly at the man. Hermione could see his hands slowly rolling into fists.

'Let him be, Bill,' a twin pleaded.

'No, I want to hear it from him – from his very mouth! I won't believe it otherwise!' Bill's voice cracked in his sudden release of his grief and denial.

Ron rose to his feet in a precise, fluid movement. He spoke in a deceptive calm, 'Why do you not heed their warnings?'

'Because I don't want to believe it . . .' Bill said thickly, as if he was about cry. 'Tell me it's not true. Tell me she's alive.'

'You want me to lie to you?' Ron asked coldly. 'I won't. I never will, even if you want the deceit.'

'But . . . how? I don't understand . . . How could you? How could you kill her?'

Ron's shoulders were shaking. Hermione shivered as cold fury washed over her from the bond – its intensity making her skin prickle. Harry and Hermione watched, their faces impassive, as Ron thrust out his arm and pulled back his sleeve. The pale, freckled skin of the top of his arm was marred by a brand, a sequence of numbers tarnishing the flesh.

'This is the reason – this is why you don't understand,' Ron's mouth twisted with every word – he pronounced each with a brutal severity. 'I got this slave brand in return for her death. I lost hope, my name, my sister and nearly my sanity. This brand and all it represents made this gap between us – one that can never be breached.' His fingers and nails clawed into the skin the brand was imprinted on. 'I can never be the same again. I can never have the same life you have, nor can I join it. When I saw that last smile on her face – that future I had died. That was the future I had with you.'

Frozen blue eyes levelled with Bill's stunned gaze. Ron's face twisted into a mask of disgust as he spat out, 'I don't ever want to see your face again. It sickens me. All I can remember is your relieved expression as they took you to safety and left me to a hell you can never imagine.'

Bill shook his head, a mad hope glinting in his eyes, 'We can help you, be your family-'

'I don't want a family,' Ron cut in harshly, 'never again, especially one that leaves me behind.'

'We had no choice . . .'

'Charlie did. Where were you when he held me? When he took that curse for me?'

'I-'

'Where were you when Ginny begged to be free?'

'Ron-'

'No, you don't have the right to use my name, you traitor. I don't fucking want to see you. At least have the decency to go away and never come back. Just leave!' he shouted out, his whole body revealing the terrible anger that was nearly overwhelming him. 'Just leave me alone!'

Bill reached out towards the boy before him, but froze when a wand stabbed his chest hard. Ron's knuckles were white as he clenched his wand, his weapon and his breath was laboured.

'I will kill you if you don't,' he whispered into Bill's ear. 'Just like I did with her.'

At that moment, Harry grabbed Ron's shoulder and the dark-haired boy did not block the fist that hit his face in reaction. He merely rubbed his cheek absently, but did not show any pain as the blood trickled out the corner of his mouth.

Hermione watched as Bill clutched his bruised chest and as his wide, wide eyes stared unseeingly at the ground. The man was in a great deal of shock. She glanced at the twins at either side of him and jerked her head down in a single nod.

The Zonko Twins grabbed each an arm of their older brother. They looked up at Ron, then at Hermione uncertainly, anguish and heart-break tearing at their expressions.

'Don't ever come back,' Hermione said flatly, her voice empty of emotions entirely. 'We won't be able to control him then. Leave.'

Tears escaped one of the twins' eyes and fell down his cheek. 'As you wish.'

xXx

Hermione stared at the glowing grate of the stove in the corner of their bedroom. It was the only source of light they had left alone – it had a warm, cleansing type of heat that permeated through the entire room. It was a little safety in the consuming darkness of the dungeons and of the night together in tandem. It scared her sometimes, how small and insignificant she felt in the dark. The night had a way of twisting the mind to its bidding – to go slightly mad from all the memories it invoked.

The girl could feel the heat of a body at her side. She rolled closer and wrapped her arms around it – she wanted to clasp the only thing that made her feel normal, feel justified. A choked sob startled her slightly and she realised it came from the person in her arms. She ran her hand up the body till its neck and felt for the scars she knew that were there.

Oh, Ron . . .

Another sob left her bonded. She tightened her arms around him, hoping to give him some reprieve, some comfort. Hermione felt Harry's hands touch her arm, then as they fell to Ron. This action, this small sacrifice of Harry's, made her want to cry. Her heart hurt from all the emotion and the sheer intensity of them.

'I . . . I-I don't want this pain . . . ' Ron sobbed, his hands gripping her own so tightly that it hurt. 'This pain . . . of my facades. The pain of waking up each day and not knowing who I am, or how I truly feel.'

The pain of controlling my emotions and actions every second – of being scared of what I would find if I did not do so with each breath.' He took in a shaky lungful of air. 'Would I find nothing? I do not know. I'm lost, in and amongst the many different skins I have created. So lost . . .'

Hermione pressed her forehead to the back of his neck, unsure of what to do. Ron had never been one to show his feelings – always hiding away when they tried to tug them forth to the surface. He had always been the anchor, the solid one, the unwavering base of their friendship and bond. It shook her to her very core that he was in such a weakened and vulnerable state.

'We'll find you, Ron,' Harry whispered in the darkness, 'We'll help you find yourself.'

'How will you know when you do?' Ron's voice was small and fragile.

'We will, my friend,' Harry said quietly, with a seemingly unbreakable patience that she had never heard from him before. 'We'll know, because you're right here. Because, right now, you're you. More so than ever before.'

Ron chuckled, 'I feel like utter crap though.'

Hermione just knew that Harry was smiling and she couldn't help but do so too. She gave out a little laugh, 'Then you're our crap-man, you silly idiot.'

The one-eyed girl felt Ron's chest rise as he took in a trembling breath. She could feel his turmoil mount again and she lay her cheek against his shoulder.

'I can't get rid of it . . . this feeling. I hate this feeling . . . this feeling of betraying them. But I have to leave them behind. I have to. I know that I'll never go forward if I don't. This past that clings to me . . . I

can't shake it.'

'The past can never be changed, nor forgotten. You know this,' Harry said in a strange voice. 'There is no other way, but to deal with it all.'

'Then I'll accept what I've done.' Ron's whole body shook as he spoke. 'I betrayed them, as they did to me. This is my retribution. The revenge that both hurts and saves them in the end.'

'Then that's what you'll do.'

Ron's voice nearly broke as he whispered, 'I'll suffer the pain of never knowing them. . .'

'So be it.'

'Yes, it'll be so – even if my heart aches for the opposite. I know that this yearning can never surmount the hatred I have within. Nothing can.'

Even our bond.

xXx

Author's Note: O.o I wrote this in one day . . . argh, this is what procrastination does to a person. I should be studying for exams! Argh . . . –brain too full- Sorry that it's a little short, but hey, it's a pretty cool chapter, don't you think?

I've decided that I'm fascinated with this character of Ron I've envisioned . . . even though I understand Hermione character better – I can't get Ron out of my head :P I think he's my favourite character out of this story. So, my dear reviewers, who is your favourite? I'm really interested . . . :)

Chapter 19 – The Sword, the Stone and the Trapdoor.

The long corridor spread out before them, swathed in a darkness that was pierced by shards of faint moonlight. A few tall windows were open and cool night air flowed in from them – chilling their breath and making the stone beneath their feet colder than it already was. Their thin, soft leather boots made the barest of noise as they crept in the shadows towards a statue that stood protectively by an arched doorway.

Hermione straightened out of her crouch, pressed herself up against the wall and stood listening in-between two hanging tapestries. She lifted her hand and put her ear to the stone blocks, then, after a long moment, she gave a single nod and dropped her arm to her side. Her gaze went down to Ron and she whispered, 'You got it prepared?'

'It was ready a day ago,' Ron hissed, in annoyance, in slight indignation, and he shot a quick glare in her direction. 'You've asked me that question three times already. So shut it, okay?'

'But this is so exciting,' she replied, her lips curving upwards into a smirk. 'It's like that time we broke into Durand's private study and stole his precious dragon's blood.'

'Hush, 'Mione,' Harry whispered absently as he placed his hands flat on the stone floor. 'We have to concentrate.' He glanced up at the red-head at his side after a long moment and nodded. 'All right, let's go.'

The two boys slipped across the span of the corridor to stand alongside the gargoyle statue. At the same time, Harry pressed his hand against the wall and Ron touched it with the tip of his wand. A blue sliver of light outlined both hand and wand for a brief moment, before starting to slowly wrap itself around the two boys.

'Hermione,' Harry hissed, turning his head to his bonded. The

one-eyed girl nodded, her face solemn, and disappeared swiftly down the corridor, then around a darkened corner. The dark-haired boy brought his gaze to Ron and they exchanged small, strained smiles.

'Be quick, I'll hold the ward for as long as I can,' Ron said, just before the blue light covered his mouth and took his voice away. Harry closed his eyes as he felt the light slowly creep up his body and dance along the small pieces of exposed skin. The magic of the ward completed its path at the crown of his head and at the tips of his boots, whispering shut.

Harry shivered slightly as he felt a partial connection with the ward's magic – he could feel parts of the room above as clearly as he could feel the cold stone against his hand. It was a strange sensation, one that he found mildly unpleasant, as his senses felt like they were stretched outside the confines of his body. But it felt no different from the bond he was a part of. Harry turned and walked to the arched doorway, making sure that his hand kept contact with the stones that anchored the ward.

He passed the unmoving statue and heard the door click open as he had urged it to. Even before he pushed it open, he could feel the steps that he would climb and the texture of carpet he would walk upon. Harry climbed the short stairway and slipped through another door to enter the office of the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

The boy took the few steps that would take him to the middle of the room, noting how strange he felt when he was at the centre of the ward and how the blue light that surrounded him pulsed writhingly. He felt like he was an oil droplet submersed in water – encased in something alien, but still not considered a notably disturbance to interrupt its passivity.

Harry shook his head and looked around at the curving bookcases that lined the circular walls. He could not see it – it was not in any of

the showcases that dotted the area or up on the walls. Shouldn't such a powerful object be within reach and be ready to be used? Harry hissed in annoyance when another of his silent searches came up empty.

'You won't find it,' a voice said and, because of the strange half-connection he had with the ward that protected the office, he knew exactly where it came from – the Sorting Hat. Harry turned to a huge, cluttered desk and looked down at the Hat, as it sat perched upon a pile of papers.

'Do I have to put you on to talk to you?' Harry whispered in question, forcing his voice flat. He could remember very clearly how the Hat had broken through his defences in his mind and he found that he did not want to repeat such a thing anytime soon. They had too much at stake.

'I don't ever want to see your mind again,' the Hat bit out, the torn rim of it moving like a mouth would, 'So, no, you don't have to.'

'I'm looking for something,' Harry said quietly. 'The Sword of Gryffindor.'

'Many are,' the Hat answered vaguely, but Harry could hear the fear in its voice and let a smirk grow on his face.

'I'm sure they are,' he answered mildly. 'But they aren't me. Now, tell me where it is. I know it's here, in this office.'

'Why? Why should I give it to you?'

'You have seen my mind – you know what I'm capable of and what I'm willing to do,' Harry said, rolling his hand into a fist and took a deep, calming breath. 'Cut the crap. Tell me.'

'I . . . you . . .' the Hat became silent for a long, tense moment. Its

mouth parted, then closed briefly, before it carried on, 'Place your hand through my rim, then in your mind say your reason why you need the Sword. If you don't get it, then I can't do or say more. Dumbledore placed a spell on me.'

Harry reached out and slipped his hand through the rim, then closed his eyes and thought clearly: I need help in destroying the soul fragments, the Horcruxes, of the Dark Lord Voldemort.

Suddenly, the Hat contracted, as though an invisible hand was squeezing it very tightly. A handle slid into Harry's grasp and he gripped it firmly, then he withdrew a long, gleaming silver sword from the Sorting Hat's mouth. It was heavy, heavier than any other weapon he had wielded, and he stared at it in half-masked awe. Rubies the size of eggs glittered on the handle and pommel as he examined it in the moonlight.

'Only a true Gryffindor can pull it out of me,' the Hat said with a hint of smugness that seemed derisory. Harry froze and brought his gaze up to the Hat. There was strangely surprised edge to its next words, 'Perhaps there is hope, after all.'

Harry's fingers tightened around the sword. It still knows nothing, even after being in my mind. Hope is for the weak and the foolish.

'You will say nothing of my presence here tonight, or of what I have taken,' Harry murmured, his eyes narrowed. The Hat was silent and still – it looked like it was merely an old, dirty wizarding hat. The green-eyed boy watched it as he wrapped the entire length of the sword with his cloak.

He knew with a strange certainty, that the Sorting Hat would not say another word till it was forced to – at the next Sorting, a long time from now. Harry tied the Sword of Gryffindor to his back and secured it, before moving to one of the low windows. He clicked it open and stood on the windowpane, looking down the side of the castle to the

shadowed ground below. He heard a whisper of air and looked up, to find the silhouetted shape of Hermione on a hovering broomstick.

'Oi, Harry, leave the poor ward behind. Don't be greedy now,' Hermione called out teasingly, grinning widely. The dark-haired boy grabbed at the blue light at his chest and pulled – tugging it off his shape and placing it back into the ward, snapping off the connection he had with it.

'All clean,' Harry said before he jumped onto the broom, wrapping his arms around her waist to steady himself. Hermione cast a strong Disillusionment charm over them and the broom, before she sped off downwards. As Harry placed his chin on her shoulder and looked down at the world below - a realisation flittered unhindered into his foremost thoughts. He smiled as he understood that even if he fell off, Hermione would catch him. That he would do the very same for her – no matter how many times it befell them.

'It's not a Horcrux,' he said into her ear. He could feel the solid weight of the sword weighing down on him and its silent, slumbering power.

'I surmised as much,' she answered, twisting her head back slightly. 'At least we can use it.'

'Yes, we can,' he said and his smile widened in his sudden mirth. 'Wouldn't it be funny to see their faces when a Slytherin is wielding their precious sword?'

xXx

Ron lounged along the couch before their fireplace – a cigarette between his lips and a lazy, slightly bewildered look on his face as he stared at Hermione. He blew out a cloud of smoke through his nose and the corner of his mouth, as he was refusing to use energy to lift his arms, or any limb for that matter, in his boredom. He blinked when Hermione calmly turned a page of the truly enormous book on

her cross-legged lap.

'Ah, it makes sense now,' she murmured, in an absent, fascinated voice as she peered down at the book. Ron shifted his position slightly to get more comfortable and frowned at her, then the book.

'What makes sense?' he asked, a mild, though escalating, irritation colouring his voice. Hermione glanced up at him, amused, then turned another page and looked down.

'The owner of the Philosopher's Stone is Nicholas Flamel,' she explained as her finger followed a line of text. 'He and Dumbledore are old friends. It makes sense that Flamel would ask the Headmaster to keep it when Gringotts couldn't assure its safety.'

'But it's stupid of Dumbledore to think that such bait wouldn't lure Voldemort to Hogwarts,' Harry said as he cleaned the sharp blade of the Sword of Gryffindor. He glared into the flickering flames of the hearth, the dirty cloth he had been using left poised. 'Why does he sanction such a threat to the students?'

'Well, remember, according to the rest of the world – Voldemort is dead,' Ron added, rubbing the bridge of his nose tiredly. 'Why would they have to worry about a dead man?'

'But I'm sure that such a man like Dumbledore would know that things are not all that they seemed. The way that Voldemort lost his body . . . something happened that night and I don't think it was a freak accident,' Harry mused quietly, and he placed the Sword on a small table. 'Remember how we heard that Longbottom said his scar burned when Snape looked at him . . .? I think it's safe to assume that his famous scar is more than just a normal scar.'

'Some have reasoned that it could be the mark left on him after the rebounded Killing Curse,' Hermione cut in as she closed her book with a thud and hefted it onto the carpet.

'But the Killing Curse leaves no mark on the body,' Harry said, his elbows resting on his knees, as he watched her stretch her legs out before her. 'No, I think that something else happened. Something that needed the Curse to conclude it – a ritual of some kind . . .'

'A ritual? Perhaps . . .'

 Hermione muttered thoughtfully. She frowned suddenly, then paled and glanced up at Harry, disbelief evident in her eye. 'No. Oh, shit.'

'You remember the ritual from the Secrets of the Darkest Art – it all fits,' Harry said, his face stony and resolute. 'The Boy-Who-Lived is a Horcrux.'

Ron's blue eyes widened and his gaze darted between his bonded.

'Do you think that Voldemort planned for it to be so?' Hermione asked, a small amount of urgency in her voice. 'He lost his body in the process though, so that can't be so . . . He made other Horcruxes before his fall without that consequence.'

Harry took in a deep breath, then said, 'There must be another reason why that night was different . . .'

'But even if he is a Horcrux, it's not like we can do anything about it now,' Ron said after Harry trailed off. 'Longbottom is too well protected. I think we should wait till we can do anything about him. Gather information, watch him and be prepared . . .'

'You're right,' Hermione sighed, then gave a wry grin. 'Before we can do anything about Boy Wonder, we have a stone to steal. That is, before the enemy does.'

Ron snorted, but his eyes were bright. 'Ah, can't have our enemy holding the source of eternal life, can we?'

'It would be unfortunate,' Harry answered with a grin.

xXx

As usual, the first year Gryffindors and Slytherins evacuated hastily from Professor Snape's potion classroom the next day. Harry lingered behind - watching as his two bonded went ahead and disappeared in the moving crowd. Then, as he made his way through the doorway and into the corridor, he bumped hard into Neville Longbottom.

'Oi, watch where you're going!' Longbottom nearly yelled as he shot a heated glare at the dark-haired boy. In response, Harry merely sneered at Longbottom and then stalked off, his green-lined robe swirling out behind his heels.

'Bloody Slytherins . . .' he heard Longbottom mutter angrily. 'Who the hell was that anyway?'

'He's been in our class all year, you idiot,' Dean Thomas said with a chuckle. 'He's Harry Potter – that quiet snake that sits in the back of the class.'

'He must be pretty quiet for me not to notice him . . .'

You have no idea . . .

Harry grinned when he turned a corner and checked the few strands of brown-hair in his hands.

Got you.

Xxx

Hermione slipped along the corridors, listening now and then for voices, before moving on. On the third floor, she crept along a dusty

hallway that had seen little use, even though there were footsteps left in the dust. She found only one locked down and whispered 'Alohomora' as she tapped it with her wand.

It creaked open and she poked her head inside, only to see a massive three-headed dog lift its head. She shut the door and locked it tight a split second later, her eye wide.

'Holy fuck,' she breathed, 'They really have a fucking Cerberus.'

Then, a moment later, she couldn't hold back her laughter.

xXx

'Please, Professor McGonagall, I have to speak with him,' Ron murmured, his gaze downcast. He had the edge of his sleeves bunched up in his fists as he worried his lip uncertainly.

'Mr Weasley, the Headmaster is a very busy man,' Professor McGonagall said sternly from her position behind her heavy wooden desk. 'I hardly think that he is who you seek. Surely Severus-'

'It's a v-very personal matter, Professor,' the red-headed boy said quietly, shaking slightly. 'It's about the therapy sessions . . .'

The witch's expression softened. 'Ah, I see. Well, the Headmaster is currently on his way to the Ministry of Magic because of an urgent matter. Perhaps I can make appointment with him in a few days, when he is back?'

'That would be wonderful. Thank you, Professor,' Ron said, smiling a little tentatively and sadly. His blue eyes were wide and a little teary as he thanked her again, before he left her office.

There's no doubt about it - it's tonight.

xXx

'I can't believe we had to bunk Herbology and History of Magic,' Hermione grumbled as they crept along the dusty stones of third floor. She glanced back behind them, still on-guard even when she knew that they were hidden by a reinforced Disillusionment charm. When she looked round again, she saw Ron staring at her in open disbelief.

'What?' she snapped, fisting her hands.

'Honestly, you're worried about class,' he muttered, shaking his head. 'Trust the berserker bookworm to worry about bloody schoolwork at a time like this. . . .'

'Hey! I actually like learning stuff,' Hermione huffed, glaring at her red-headed bonded. 'We do have exams soon -'

'Oi, no bickering,' Harry murmured in exasperation as they came up to the door Hermione had pointed out. He looked over his shoulder at the one-eyed girl and nodded, pressing his wand-point to the large lock of the door.

Hermione took a step forward, wearing a wide and wicked grin as she pulled a shotgun out from within her cloak and cocked it solidly. 'Kay – let's do this.'

'Alohomora,' Harry hissed, and tugged the door open sharply. Hermione darted in and Harry slammed it closed behind her, just as Ron cast a sound-muffling spell around the perimeter of the room their bonded had entered.

They listened, but the rising growls and snarls were cut off by the faint, resounding cracks of a firearm.

The door creaked open a moment later and Hermione beckoned them in, holding her shotgun in her other hand. Ron and Harry closed

and locked the door, before they turned around. The three-headed dog lay sprawled on the ground, tongues lolling out of its mouths and eyes wide open. Drool and blood pooled around the still twitching creature, while one paw pressed against the wall feebly.

'My experiment was a success,' Hermione said coolly, pride mixing in with her words. 'My poison bullets do in fact work.'

'Does it work fast?' Harry asked in interest, as he watched avidly as the creature dealt with its final death throes.

'Very,' Hermione promptly answered and she prodded one of the dog's legs with a boot. 'The poison crushes the motor functions, then the integrative functions of the central nervous system. The heart soon fails to beat as the brain shuts down. A quick fatality.'

'It's these kinds of things that make me scared to piss you off sometimes. . .' Ron murmured, staring at the three-headed dog in morbid fascination. Hermione's mouth quirked up into a highly amused smile and she poked the red-head's shoulder playfully.

'Beware, I know where you sleep . . .' she said impishly, and got a half-hearted glare in return.

'Guys, there's a trapdoor,' Harry called out from the other side of the dog's body. 'Hermione, deal with . . .' he gestured with distaste at the dying Cerberus, ' . . . this.'

'Aye, aye, captain!' she retorted cheekily, before grabbing her wand and using a spell to draw out the bullets that were imbedded in the creature's weeping wounds. The two boys clustered around the open trapdoor, crouched and thoughtful as they stared down into the darkness. They glanced at one another, weaving emotions together with the bond, and then Ron withdrew a flare from one of his pockets. He lit it with his smiley face lighter and threw it in – leaving them to watch as it fell and fell downwards. Finally, it hit something and Harry

could barely make out a thick root and the snake-like creepers that recoiled from the harsh light of the flare.

Harry frowned, 'Mione, a plant that moves and dislikes light?'

'Devil's Snare,' she answered as she wiped thickening, dark blood off a mangled bullet with a piece of cloth. 'Use fire against it.'

Ron rubbed his chin, 'It'll soften our fall, then we can burn it.'

Without another word, Harry jumped through the trapdoor and he landed on something soft. He rolled to the side, his eyes not used to the gloom, and sent an approving feeling along the bond. Ron followed straightaway and moved quickly out of the way of an approaching Hermione. Harry tensed an arm as he felt a creeper twist its way up it and he withdrew his wand.

'We can't destroy it completely with fire,' Hermione said quietly in the near darkness. 'Too much effort. Just scare it away.'

'Now she tells us,' Ron muttered and Harry just knew that the red-head was rolling his eyes.

Harry lifted his wand and whispered a spell, blinded for second by the blue flame that erupted from its tip. The plant and creepers cringed away from the flame – retreating further into the darkness, wriggling and flailing as they went.

The three children slipped off the plant and jumped onto a muddy stone floor, with a door in sight. They inspected the door and found that it was locked soundly – and any attempts at picking it open failed as the lockpicks melted upon contact with the metal. As Ron nursed a burnt finger, Harry tried opening spells and even kicking it open.

'Screw this,' Harry cursed under his breath, 'Incendio!'

The door burst in flame and they moved back, squinting their eyes against the light. The wood cracked and exploded, falling apart as it burned. As soon as the fire died down into smoking coals – Ron jumped over the charred remains of the door and Harry glanced back at Hermione, who was kneeling in a dark shadow.

'Hermione . . . ' Harry called out reproachfully as he stared at his female bonded.

'Yeah, yeah, coming,' she replied as she looked down at the ground intently. 'Come on, little one . . . come here, yes, right here . . . ' she cooed, reaching out slowly. One of the Devil's Snare's creepers slid closer, then as it came within reach, Hermione thrust out a hand and grabbed it, holding it in a vice-like grip. As the creeper writhed in her grasp, she sliced off the end bit of it with cold precision.

She bottled the part of the creeper and hid it in one of the pouches attached to her belt, before following Harry over the door. They went onwards, stalking through a dank passageway that sloped downwards.

Near the end of it, they heard a soft rustling and clinking ahead. Then, the passageway opened up into a brilliantly lit chamber with an arching ceiling that was filled with hundreds of small, jewel-bright birds. Fluttering and tumbling, the birds played and soared through the air.

'They're winged-keys . . . ' Hermione murmured, her head thrown back as she watched the glittering objects flap their wings. Ron tried the heavy wooden door on the other side of the room and shook his head.

'It's locked and got a ward on it,' he called out, 'Even going pyro on it won't work.' He grinned at the scowl Harry gave him.

'There's no doubt about it, the key is somewhere up there,' Hermione

said, glancing between her bonded. 'Those brooms over there are for that purpose.'

'Wouldn't it be easier to just summon the damn key?' Harry asked, glaring up at the many flying keys above.

'You could try,' Hermione answered with a shrug, 'But there's a high chance that they'll be spelled against such magic.'

'It's a big, old-fashioned one – probably silver, like the handle,' Ron mused as he examined the door. Harry nodded and strode to the middle of the chamber – lifting his wand high. He stared hard up at the hordes of keys, looking for what Ron had described. After a few long moments, he noticed a key that had one crumpled blue wing that fitted the description.

'Accio key!' Harry shouted, pointing it at the winged-key. It shot downwards into his open, waiting hand and on instinct, upon hearing the rush of air above, the boy threw himself to the side and rolled away – just missing a sea of keys shoot down to where he had been. A freezing charm from Hermione's wand froze the keys to the ground – but it was evident that it would not last long from the furious movement and rattling.

Harry ran across the room and stabbed the key into the door, thrusting it open with trembling hands and closing it just in time. They listened to the repeated hammering of the keys in the other side of the door and each stifled a sigh of relief when it ceased.

Harry ran a hand through his dark hair and tugged at a clump of hair as he leant against the still door. He lowered his arm and glanced at Hermione. 'How is Longbottom's heart-rate going?'

The girl frowned for a moment, then checked the colour of her glowing wand. 'It's normal. He's not a bit excited.' She looked up and grinned. 'Certainly not chasing after a Dark Lord.'

'Okay, then we have more time than I thought,' Harry said, his hands rolling into fists. 'Let's go.'

The next room was very dark, but light flooded in the moment they were a few steps inside. The three children blinked unsteadily and stared at what was before them- they were standing on the edge of a huge chess board that was inhabited by towering, faceless chess pieces. Close by, the black pieces stood unmoving and silent, facing the opposing white side of the board.

'Ah, chess . . .' Ron said with a nostalgic tone to his voice. 'We have to play our way across to get out of here.' He pointed at the dark shape of an opening behind the white chessmen.

'This is your domain, Ron,' Harry said, taking a step back. 'You know very well how pathetic we are at the game.'

'That I do,' he answered with a crooked smile.

Ron took the place of one of the black knights, whilst ordering Hermione and Harry to the castle and bishop positions respectively. After the white side moved first, Ron started to direct the black pieces across the board. His voice was detached as he murmured orders, which the black pieces obeyed silently, only lulling in his commanding when he paused now and then to consider their next move. Both Harry and Hermione followed his lead without complaint, without questioning his strategy, as they always had when they had encroached upon Ron's areas of expertise.

They darted around the board and together took as many pieces as they lost. Ron himself went forward and opened a path for Harry to checkmate the King – if he had not been a single block away from the Queen close by, he would've been knocked off board entirely, and unmercifully so.

Just as they left the room, Ron looked back with a small amount of wistfulness and admiration, 'I guess I have to respect old McGonagall now . . . not only is she was master at Transfiguration, but she also knows how play a mean game of chess.'

Hermione grinned wolfishly as they walked, 'Bet she could show you a few things with a wand you'd never imagine, boy-o.'

The red-head gave a dramatic shudder, his expression aghast, 'Please, just please, don't reveal any more of your sordid mind to sane.'

She snorted in amusement, 'Let's not question your assumed sanity now, Ron, because if my sense of smell is not deceiving me – we have a rather fragrant troll on the other side of this door. Best not keep it waiting.'

'Stunner?' Ron queried, lifting his wand.

Harry nodded, 'All at once, and they'll have to be pretty strong.'

Both Ron and Hermione nodded, then went into position behind their dark-haired bonded – their wands poised and a spell on the tip of their tongues. The door was unlocked and they cracked it open, darting in on swift limbs, surrounding the large, looming shape in the yellowish haze.

The troll roared the second its small, beady eyes found them and swung one of its overly long arms at Hermione, a huge wooden club in its grasp. The one-eyed girl swore loudly as she dived to the side to dodge the club and nearly flinched when she heard it smash into the tiles that covered the ground.

'Stupefy!' they shouted as one, their wands slashing at the air. Three bolts of red light hurtled towards the lumpy body of the troll as it tried to wrench its club out of the ground. The troll let out a deafening roar

as they stunners hit it, its thick fingers convulsing around the handle of its blunt weapon and its body swayed dangerously from side to side.

When the troll shook its head drunkenly and tugged its club from the earth, slight panic and urgency coursed through the bond as they watched it suddenly recover. Harry rolled and jumped out of the way of the club as the troll swung it again and again, roaring and snarling brutishly as it attacked.

Ron's back touched a wall and he frowned, whipping up his wand. 'Wingardium Leviosa!' he shouted, aiming at the club and grabbing it in his spell. The troll's club slipped out of its grasp and the ugly creature stopped and stared at its hands stupidly. Ron yelled out as he brought his arm down, as the club mirrored his movement, and there was a sickening crunch.

The troll was completely still for a few, tense moments, before it collapsed into heap on the floor. The whole room trembled when it fell.

They glanced at one another, their panting the only thing to be heard, before their gazes went back to the troll. Hermione stared at the indent the club had made on the troll's head, at the cracked, bruised skin and the blood that oozed out slowly.

'Do you think it's dead?' Harry asked quietly, as he brushed off some dust on his pants.

'Ron did hit it pretty hard . . .' Hermione said, giving the red-head at her side a side-long smirk, which he returned. 'Even for a troll it would be a little difficult to live with a crushed brain, Harry.'

One of Harry's eyebrows rose, 'I see. Just checking.'

Hermione chuckled softly as she followed the two boys across the

room and over one of the troll's massive legs. Harry pulled open the next door and the moment they stepped over the threshold, a purple flame engulfed the doorway behind them. On the other side of the room, a black flame sprang up in the opposing doorway and cut off their means of escape – trapping them effectively.

'Those fuckheads that made these tests had way too much goddamn time on their hands . . . ' Hermione muttered angrily as she glared at the doorways. Her eyes darted to a low table in the middle of the room and her gaze became calculating as she noticed the seven bottles upon it. She walked up to the table and grabbed the piece of the parchment that lay beside the bottles. Both Ron and Harry looked over her shoulders to read it:

Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,

Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,

One among us seven will let you move ahead,

Another will transport the drinker back instead,

Two among our number hold only nettle wine,

Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line.

Choose, unless you wish to stay here for evermore,

To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:

First, however slyly the poison tries to hide

You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;

Second, different are those who stand at either end,

But if you would move onwards, neither is your friend;

Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,

Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;

Fourth, the second left and the second on the right

Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.

'You know, this sounds awfully a lot like Snape . . . ' Ron said as he took a step back. 'That bastard would love to make things difficult right at the very end.'

'Perhaps,' Hermione said absently, though it sounded like her mind was busy. She read over the parchment again, then peered over it at the line of bottles. 'Logic . . . what most wizards lack . . . '

'Hermione?' Harry asked, looking at her askance.

'Shush,' she murmured in reply as she read the parchment once more. 'I'm thinking.'

Ron rolled his eyes, giving the girl an amused look, before he strode over to the doorway with the black flames. His blue eyes shone with interest as he inspected the spellwork. 'Quite brilliant, I must say . . . ' He crouched down and ran his hands along the wall beside the doorway. 'These wards are amazing.'

'Is there any way to manipulate them?' Harry asked him as he watched Hermione pace in front of the table.

'There is a crack here,' Ron said as he looked up at Harry, 'A befuddlement charm may do.'

The dark-haired boy closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. 'That

could work, but we'll have to get some help from the bond to make the wards think we all one person.'

'Technically, we are,' Ron murmured slowly, thoughtfully. 'In terms of magic, that is.'

Harry opened his eyes, 'But we'll have to make it think that three different living, breathing bodies are the same . . . that'll be a more than a little tricky, Ron,' he replied, staring at the black flames as they lapped at the top of the doorway.

'Stop complaining and just do it,' Ron said as he straightened, getting up out of his crouch. He had a bored, unimpressed look on his face as he placed a cigarette in-between his lips and lit it with a flick of his lighter. A scowl flittered onto Harry's face as he watched Ron blow out a cloud of smoke in his face - an expectant and annoyingly patient glint to his blue eyes.

'Aha!'

The two boys turned round to see Hermione lift a tiny bottle from the table. She grinned at them, waving it around. 'Here's the potion that'll let us go through!'

'It's only for one person . . . ' Ron murmured, understanding filling his voice. He glanced back at Harry and smirked. 'Looks like we need your befuddling magic, mate.'

'You've made your point, you bastard,' Harry said, glaring at the smug red-head. 'Okay, we have to drink a bit of that potion and then I'm going to manipulate the bond, all right?'

'Why don't you leave the bond to me while you concentrate on your spell?' Ron asked, as he crushed the remains of his cigarette in a gloved palm. Harry nodded in acquiescent and took one of Hermione's hands.

They all let a drop of the dark potion fall onto their tongues.

Ron slid his own hand into the girl's other, intertwining their fingers, and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. Harry jabbed his wand's point into the flames, whispering the spell's incantation so softly that they couldn't hear it, but in their mind's eye they could see the image that Harry projected out onto the wards. Ron pulled the bond's connection tight and taunt, letting their magic mingle together as one for that brief, needed moment as the wards inspected them.

Harry saw the opening first and he tugged his bonded through after him, running through the flames that had frozen stiff. As they stopped and stared at one another, Hermione's wand glowed green within its holster on the underside of her wrist.

'Shit!' she spat out, 'Boy Wonder is coming!'

'Then we got to make this really quick,' Harry said as they raced down the passageway. Torches burst into flame as they ran past, lighting the path behind them, then flitted out some moments later. They burst though into a large chamber that had a huge mirror right in the middle of it.

The mirror had an ornate gold frame and was standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription along the top of it that read: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

'Ah, Dumbledore is full of surprises, isn't he?' Hermione murmured sarcastically. 'For him to have the Mirror of Erised . . .'

'Isn't that the mirror that shows anyone their deepest desires?' Ron asked, glancing at the mirror warily, but not too closely.

'Yes, and those that are captivated with what is shown go mad,' she replied clinically, circling the mirror. 'This is the final test.'

Harry looked around the room for another door and when he found none, he said, 'But where is the Stone?'

'Mmmm . . . perhaps it is in the Mirror,' she mused pensively, 'And it only gives up the Stone when a worthy person comes by . . .'

'We don't have time for this,' Harry bit out, nodding towards Hermione's wand, which was still sporting a green glow. 'They're coming.'

She looked away, at the floor, and said uncertainly, 'We'll have to look into the Mirror then.'

'So be it,' Harry said determinedly, 'I'll do it.'

'Harry . . .' Hermione frowned and looked torn. 'We may not be ready to see what it shows us.'

'It doesn't have to be 'us', Hermione,' the boy retorted, taking a step forward. 'I told you - I'll do it.'

Ron grabbed Harry's shoulder and pulled him around to face him. 'You idiot. It'll always be us together – so don't spew out this crap all over again. I thought you had finally stopped questioning our loyalty.'

'We don't have time for this!'

'Then let's go,' Ron replied steadily, taking Harry's hand in his own. 'Let's go get the Stone.'

Hermione grabbed Harry's other free hand and held it tight. 'Stop being an arse already. If they come, then they'll come. Just means we'll get to blast their arses to Pluto and back a little earlier than we predicted.'

'Such fixation with buttocks, Miss Granger – so shocking!' Ron said in an overly pompous tone of voice, as if what he had heard was the most scandalous thing that had ever entered his ears.

Harry glanced between, then sighed tiredly, lowering his head. As they started arguing playfully over him, he tried to stifle the grateful smile that threatened to break loose. It was good to have them at his side – to have them to pull him back into place.

'All right, let's go, you idiots,' Harry said, pulling them forward towards the Mirror of Erised. Both Hermione and Ron grinned at one another behind his back, obediently following his lead.

They all sobered as they walked slowly up to the large mirror, their steps tentative and wary. At first, Harry saw nothing but himself and his two bonded at his sides, then the image began to change. There was a man, a person whom Harry would never forget, kneeling in the mirror. He had shoulder-length hair that was dark and beautiful, his skin was deathly pale and his eyes a deep blood red.

The man had strings attached to his body, at his head, his legs and arms – like a puppet. Harry looked up, his gaze following the strings and nearly started when he saw himself holding a wooden cross above the man, like he was a puppet master. The handsome man was clutching at his neck frantically, his red eyes wide in desperation as the mirror-Harry twisted the strings – making the man thrust his own hand down his throat.

Voldemort, Harry thought in a fascinated disgust as the man slowly suffocated on his own flesh. He felt Hermione's hand tightened around his, not blinking an eye at how painfully she did so. He briefly wondered what she had seen, but decided not to pry.

Harry stared deep into the Mirror, then thought clearly, urgently, almost desperately: He can not get it first. Nothing will matter anymore if he gets the Stone. Nothing.

The image in the Mirror changed once more. The mirror-Harry smiled and took a small blood-red stone out of his pocket, then placed it back into it again, patting the pocket gently. Something heavy dropped into Harry's pocket – the exact one that the mirror had shown – and he froze in his disbelief.

I have the Stone.

Suddenly, he realised the full extent of the power of the Philosopher's Stone. With it, they could be eternal - they could be rich beyond their wildest dreams! They could stop killing for money without the fear of resorting to living on the streets again. Durand would no longer have a hold over them. Never would have they have to fear death and what lay beyond it. With the countless years ahead and the gold to support them . . . Harry let himself dream, for just a moment, about how life could be.

But then, as he looked up at the Mirror of Erised again – he saw Voldemort and all the dreams that had burst in tender, tentative life died in his heart.

Harry let go of his bonded's hands, and took a step back. They glanced at him, their faces ashen as his was and their eyes haunted each with a horrifying comprehension. Harry withdrew the Philosopher's Stone and held it loosely in his palm.

'For the retribution,' he murmured quietly, then he threw the Stone to the floor and crushed it under his heel.

Even my dreams will not deter me.

xXx

Author's Note: Sigh. I'm sorry, guys, for the long wait. I just wasn't in the mood for this story – or any story for that matter. It took me ages

to get through the whole 'through the trapdoor' episode. But now, I'm on holiday for the next two months and I'll have loads of time to write :)

I know I said that first year would be finished in this chapter, but I promised it'll be over in the next one! This chapter kinda dragged on a little too long for me and I had to end it.

Anywa, hope you enjoyed this instalment :)

~puddle

Chapter 20 – What Can Not Be Undone

Albus Dumbledore slowly opened his eyes, then blinked up into the gloom. He untangled his arm from his bed-spread, reaching up to his old, lined face to rub his eyes clear of sleep. For a brief moment, as his mouth widened in a yawn, he contemplated over whether he should roll over and fall asleep again or awake to the new day. Waking from his half-sleep seemed a slightly daunting prospect, but he knew that he would not have awoken unless something was amiss.

Dumbledore sat up, then tugged off his night-cap. He stared at it blearily for a moment, recognising it only after seeing the unicorn print across it. He had acquired it last Christmas from his old friend, Nicholas Flamel, who had been very amused as to its bizarreness. And just to add a dab of humour to the day, his friend had placed a Sticking Charm onto it as well. On retrospect, Nicholas had been far to amused over the whole debacle to not be guilty. But, as always, Dumbledore had taken it in his stride and laughed it off. It had been amusing, after all. The only consequence had been a few more students concluding that he was mad, but that was always manageable.

He pulled the covers away from his old, wiry legs and swung them over the edge of the bed to place his feet on the cold stone floor. After a few moments of groping in the dark, he found his slippers and half-moon spectacles by his bedside. By the smouldering, dying coals of his fireplace, he slipped on a gown to fight off the cold. Personally, he did not like using magic for such menial tasks. In his old age, using magic willy-nilly was tiresome and not to mention exasperating. No, he liked doing some things the muggle-way. It always gave him a little, hidden thrill.

The old wizard took his wand into his grasp and glanced up at the door to his office. He reached out with his magic and inspected the wards. After a moment, his eyes narrowed behind his spectacles.

With his wand ready, he walked to the door and carefully opened it, peering past the doorframe and down the small stairway that lead to his office.

As far as he could see, there was no-one about. There was nothing but silence and shadows.

After murmuring a Silencing charm on his slippers, he slowly, cautiously made his way into his office. He stilled by his desk, his watery-blue eyes roving the span of the room like a hawk. His gaze settled on a window on the other side of the room, which was pushed closed, but the handle had been prised up and open.

Ah, thought Dumbledore as he weaved past his cluttered desk, the escape route, perhaps?

He stopped in front of the window and crouched, inspecting it, his hand poised at his chin. He tilted his head to the side, letting his magic join briefly with the ward, and saw the small inconstancies almost immediately. There was an echo of ward manipulation.

Someone had infiltrated his office.

Dumbledore rose up and out of his crouch, ignoring the ache of his back as he did so. Whoever had played with his wards was no amateur. Nearly all the evidence had been wiped away, nothing was disturbed physically, and there was no trace of a magical signature. The old wizard looked over his shoulder, at his bookcases, his desk and cabinets. As far as he could make out in the candle-lit gloom, nothing was missing, nothing stolen.

It was almost as if this someone had whispered in like a breeze. Like a brief shadow, a fleeting thought.

Dumbledore shook his head. He lifted his wand to the level of his chest and closed his eyes, summoning up the link between Guardian

and Sanctuary – between him and Hogwarts. He felt the castle rise up to his magic and touch it like a caress, heeding his call. A rush of information, feeling and want washed over him, before he promptly broke the connection with a downwards slash of his wand.

For a breathless moment, his eyes stayed closed and his back straight. Then, he let out a gush of air, a near sigh, and sat down on one of the many armchairs he had littered around his office. He stared at the stuttering flame of a candle, his hands clasped together on his lap, and thought.

No one could fool the wards of Hogwarts. Of that, he was certain.

By the information given to him, he knew now that no one had entered the castle. There were only the students and the staff within. He mulled over the thought of one of the professors sneaking into his office, then pushed it out of his mind. He had checked them thoroughly over the many years. He knew that none of his employees had the level of expertise to fool his wards.

Then it had to be student.

Dumbledore was not so naive, or idealist enough, that he'd toss aside such a prospect. He had fought in two wars, and some scars never healed, nor did certain realisations disappear. He had seen mere children kill and not break down. He had seen prodigies wreak havoc when they had fallen into a Dark Lord's hands and how, sometimes, they had been twisted beyond repair. No, he may hold hope and forgiveness, but he knew the limits.

Laying a hand on the arm of his chair, he ran his fingertips over covering material a little absently. As he sat there, deep in thought, he did not notice the Sorting Hat silently watching him.

xXx

Harry ran down the passageway, Ron and Hermione close at his heels. Behind them, their shadows stretched and flitted across the stones, accompanied by the sound of their fast footfalls. They had no thoughts of stealth as they went – they had no time. Every second counted.

This chance is unprecedented, Harry thought as his breath came out in short gasps. We may be not strong enough now, but we need this.

When they came to the entrance to their quarters, Hermione thrust her arm forward and pressed her knuckles against the wall, whispering urgently, demandingly, 'Cras!'

The stones quivered, parting to reveal a door. She opened it before the magic could settle, squeezing through inside. Both Ron and Harry followed, just as Hermione darted into her lab. Harry ran into their bedroom, flinging drawers open as he searched. Near the bottom of one of their cupboards, he uncovered a large, shallow silver bowl. He grabbed it and ran out of the room.

By the fire, Ron was manoeuvring a wooden table into place. Hermione had two vials in her hand and she was checking their contents by placing them before a light. Harry heaved the bowl onto the table.

Ron frowned, half his face touched by the firelight, 'Are you sure this is the only way? If the wards don't hold – they'll know. '

'We have to risk it,' Hermione said determinedly as she poured a pail of water into the bowl. 'If the Dark Magic breaks through, we'll run. We've done it before, and this time will be no different.'

'We'll change our plans according to the results of this,' Harry said softly. 'Whether we go free, or become wanted by both muggle and wizarding kind.'

Ron looked away at the floor. 'Either way, this will be difficult.'

'Were we not aware of that from the beginning? This is no time for uncertainty, Ron.'

'I am merely being cautious. We are in the middle of Hogwarts, not in some muggle suburb.'

'Even so, this is a chance we can't pass up,' Harry retorted, his green eyes flashing dangerously. 'If we do not find out how this will play out, we'll never be completely certain as to what really happened. We need this information. I have not lived under that monster's very nose for the past months, only to let him go free unhindered.'

The red-headed boy let out a sigh and he sat down on the couch. He stared pensively at the flames in the grate, before he breathed out tiredly, 'Do as you see fit.'

Hermione reached out and placed a hand on Ron's shoulder. She stared at him, long and hard. 'We have no home. Always remember that.'

Ron nodded stiffly.

She brought her gaze to Harry's and asked, 'What should we use? Longbottom's hair, or Quirrell's saliva?'

'Longbottom's,' Harry answered as he took his place by the table and bowl, followed by Ron. 'Anything of Quirrell's could be unstable – we have no idea as to how much his physical body has changed by playing host to another's soul.'

Hermione nodded and withdrew a small vial from her belt, eyeing it critically. She popped the vial open and used a pair of tweezers to pick up a single brown hair from within. She dropped it into the bowl and watched as it floated on the water's surface, then as it sunk.

Harry gripped the handle of his wand tightly as he pressed its point to his chest, directly over his heart. Both of his bonded mirrored his action, their eyes closed and visions swimming in darkness. Slowly, they called upon their magic, letting it trickle out as they guided their wand's tip up to their shoulders, to their arms and down to their bare wrists. Gently, they trailed their magic to the top of their thumbs, and there it crested.

Their wands clattered to stone floor.

Suddenly, swiftly and as one, they brought their thumbs to their mouths. They bit down, tearing the flesh with their teeth till blood burst forth. Together, they thrust their hands into the water.

'By flesh and blood,' Hermione intoned, watching the frail trail of blood leave her wound. 'Fateor.'

Both bowl and water shone brightly, so much so they were near blinded for a moment. Tendrils of magic crept unseen along and up the skin of their arms, dancing, writhing to a fast unheard beat. The magic centred around their eyes, crawling under their eyelids and slipping into muscle and vein alike.

The light faded into a soft glow, the magic calm and misting over their skin. They stared down at the contents of the bowl – finding not only water, but an image upon it. They could see a clear image of three boys – one standing, two fallen.

We made it in time, they thought to each other, the essence of their message echoing along the bond. Back and forth and scattering.

Quirrell was before the Mirror, hand and wand raised. His turban was unfurled and about his shoulders, revealing a head devoid of hair. There was a voice, high and slightly familiar, that did not belong to either man or boy. As it spoke of promises and of life that was lost,

Harry recognised its owner. It held power, but a parody of how it used to be.

Voldemort, they realised one after another.

The boy still standing – Longbottom – tried to move, but he stumbled back, his hand clutching desperately at the scar upon his forehead. Quirrell grabbed the boy's wrist, as they high voice had ordered, and then snatched his hand back as if he had been burned. The man stared in horror as his hand twitched uncontrollably, blistering black before tumbling off his arm as grey ash.

Quirrell thrust out his other hand, grasping the boy's neck as he howled in bewildered rage, trying to strangle him. Longbottom's face filled with blinding pain as Quirrell flung him to the ground, then cradled the blackened stumps of his arms to his chest. Before he could react, Longbottom grabbed the man's calf for that brief, needed moment.

Quirrell collapsed to ground, curling into himself, groping the air where part of his limb had been moments before. Suddenly, he clutched his head and screamed, pleading and sobbing. They watched as a ghost-like substance rose from the man's body and fled, making its path up and through the ceiling of the chamber.

The image rippled and dispersed as the boy became unconscious.

xXx

Moonlight shone through into the darkened Hospital Wing, falling over ancient stone and bouncing off the metal headboards of the beds. There was a lone candle with a fluttering flame on Madame Pomfrey's desk in her office on the far side of the aisle. The old nurse glanced up now and then from her written reports, to peer through her open door and at her patients. She paused only once, though briefly, when one Albus Dumbledore silently walked in.

Dumbledore stopped by a row of beds, clothed in a rich dark purple that melded with the shadows and sparkled softly in the silver light. He stared down at the sleeping faces of three boys, who were wrapped up in bandages in places. One shifted in his slumber, rolling onto his side and pulling at his pillow. Dumbledore's face became grave when the circular scar, now raw and stark against his pale skin, came into view.

This boy, Dumbledore thought sadly, will never know peace.

The old man shook his head, then turned and left. He closed the arched door behind him, before he made his way down the empty hallway. His footsteps were soft, as a result of a spell, his robes fluttering out behind his heels. The further he went, the darker his thoughts became.

The residue magic he had found coursing through Quirrell was unmistakable. Voldemort was alive somehow, as he had feared. And he still had nothing to alleviate his doubts and speculations, as Quirrell had been silent through all questioning, just staring dumbly at his bandaged stumps.

Dumbledore rounded a corner, looking up as he saw two Aurors standing on either side of a door. He stopped before them, nodding in greeting, before he was let through into the room. He waved his wand, spelling light forth, and froze in his tracks at what he found.

Chained to the chair, Quirrell sat with his head lolled back, baring his neck. There was a long, precise cut, from one ear to the other, just above his Adam's apple. Dark blood poured and dried down his chest and pooled partly in his lap. The skin of one lower arm had been peeled away and hammered into the dead man's skull with a nail.

On that dripping, curling piece of flesh lay the Dark mark for all to

see.

xXx

Hermione Granger stared down at the small boy, as he curled into himself, his brown hair poking out from the white sheets. She watched as he mumbled quietly, rubbing his nose with the knuckles of one hand. His eyes were flickering with movement behind their lids, his lips slightly parted as his chest rose and fell evenly. A shard of moonlight fell across his back, making the sheets glow, baring his vulnerability.

So young . . . far too young.

She glanced up in the direction of the nurse's office and saw that the old witch was still in her spelled sleep. She looked down at Neville Longbottom and lifted her wand, moving it sharply to the side and back again.

'Infilar,' she murmured, watching as a faint blue thread that only she could see attached itself to his wrist. Her eye shot down to her own wrist, to the other end of the thread. No matter how far, or close they'd be – what was done could not be undone, unless she deemed it so.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a small mirror propped up against the boy's jug of water on his bedside table. She stared at her reflection, smirking slightly when she noted the splatter of blood on her cheek.

'Sleep well, little Gryffindor,' she whispered smoothly. 'Be a good little bait now.'

xXx

Author's Note: Whoa. Dude, like wow. I actually wrote stuff for this

story. O.o I guess being sick has its perks? Well, for you guys who read my story :) So yeah, hope you enjoyed this and found it not so confusing. School had started, so I won't be able to regularly update – maybe a chapter every month or so? It depends on my overall mood, sorry. Sometimes, this story is a little . . . too intense for me, you know?

Well, anyway, first year is over. Finally.

. . . O.o I have been waiting for far too long to be able to kill Quirrell. Nasty bugger. I like him dead and rotting. May all the daisies he pushes up wither!

Chapter 21 – Target Practice

Above the bustling crowd below, Hermione stood upon the second story of Flourish & Blotts looking down at the first. As she leant against the banister, her elbows resting on top of the wood of it, her dark brown eye was set on a certain man like a hawk, following his every movement and dissecting his every expression. Her pale skin was a stark contrast to the dark leather of her eye-patch and the black colour of her cloak, its hood pooling around her neck and over her shoulders. With her gaze never leaving the man below, she lazily held a book in her hand.

The man was good-looking, young and graced with a pair of gleaming white teeth that Hermione almost found garish. He sat at the wall, behind a table, signing books and flashing dazzling smiles. He was aided also by the large moving photographs above and around him who winked and smiled nauseously too. Hermione sneered down at him.

So utterly full of yourself, aren't you?

The girl could clearly imagine him practicing his grins in front of a mirror. She snorted, mostly in disgust, before looking down at the book she had in her hand. After a moment, she cracked it open and skimmed through the text, reading passages in full here and there. Slowly, as more pages turned, the line of her mouth parted and widened into a grin that bared teeth. She snapped the book closed, letting her gaze follow the line of the man's admirers and their expressions of awe and delight. At this, a morbidly satisfied humour she had been savouring rose up and nearly made her chuckle.

She leaned forward over the railing and looked down below, noticing a commotion at the store front. The man was leaving, taking a break. The girl stared down at the book, at the waving, smiling man on its cover, then at the retreating back of her prey. She schooled her expression to that of neutrality and placed the book upon the railing,

balancing it on its back. She slipped down a small stairway, and weaved her way through the milling, indignant crowd with little difficulty.

Unnoticed, she slid under the abandoned cashier desk and pulled open a door, sneaking into a short passageway. With help from a line of shadow that hugged the wall, she moved forward on silent feet past a man that presumably was a guard. Only one door was parted, and she darted in, making the barest of sounds. With a hand, she pressed the door closed behind her with a soft click.

The room was small, a storage place she assumed, and dimly lit. The man was alone, his wavy hair brushed back out of his face as he took a sip of water from a pitcher. He set it down on a dusty table, taking in a deep breath, when she pressed her wand into his back.

He would've yelled if she hadn't silenced him with a spell. Instead, he stood frozen, his mouth open and blue eyes wide.

'Hello,' she whispered softly, 'Mr Lockhart.'

Hermione could see him shaking. It was very satisfying. 'Really, sir, is this how such an accomplished wizard as yourself reacts? So disappointing . . .'

Lockhart gripped the pitcher's handle tighter, his knuckles white. He was a pale, utterly pale. Hermione's mouth curved up into a smile as she ran her wand's tip up and along the length of his back.

'You seem so . . . heroic in your writings, sir. So dashing, so fearless,' she almost purred the word. 'Not to mention, you are handsome. And you have such an attractive, vulnerable back as well . . .'

The girl paused, then dug her wand sharply into his spine – his back arched away, mouth open in a silent cry. 'It's so very tempting . . .'

she said in a low hiss, 'And so very pleasing . . . especially to know

that if I had wanted your life, I could've and still can take it with ease.'

Hermione smirked, liking how she could almost taste his fear in the air. She licked her lips. 'But,' she punctuated the word with a jab at his head with her wand, 'my dear sir, I'm a moral person. Unlike you.'

She drew back, lowering her arm and weapon, 'You're weak, but amusing at least.' Her tone became slyly mocking, 'Now, be a good boy and stop stealing other people's glory, okay?' Hermione grinned when she saw him stiffen alarmingly. 'Well, Mr Lockhart, your many fans await - so I'll cease to be greedy. I'm that nice a person, truly. See you at school, Professor.'

After a long while of silence, Gilderoy Lockhart turned around, only to find he was alone.

xXx

'He's a fraud.'

Harry looked up from the rising steam of his coffee and laid deep green eyes on the girl opposite him. He took in her lazy seat, the hand propping up her face by her chin and her half-lidded eye. He wrapped his fingers around his half-empty mug, to warm them, to conserve heat. One side of his mouth slowly curved upwards in amusement.

'Ah,' he took a sip of coffee. 'Satisfied now?'

Hermione grinned, 'Hardly.'

The dark-haired boy shook his head, chuckling softly. 'Well, you do have the entire school year, yeah?'

'True,' Hermione mused, as she looked out onto the busy street outside. She made a face. 'I can't believe that he's going to teach us

this year. I'm in half a mind to conclude that Dumbledore really is mad, like so many say.'

'Mad or not – it will be amusing for sure,' Harry said, placing his mug on the round table they were sitting at. He glanced around the small cafe, scanning the faces of their fellow customers. 'Think of the opportunities we'll have to make a fool of him.'

'Just wait till you see him,' she rubbed the bridge of her nose. 'Trust me, he needs no help in making a fool of himself.'

xXx

Lifting a small stool, Ron turned round to place it next to the kitchen counter. He stepped up onto it, balancing as he reached up and grabbed the handle of the cupboard above. His hand was wrapped around it, poised in the action of opening the door, but he had paused to stare out through the small window above the sink – looking past dirty white curtains to watch the rising sun hovering over muggle London and the horizon. Through the pollution haze, he could see the sun's thin red light smudged across the morning sky like a finger-print.

Ron shook his head slightly, making red hair fall across his eyes, and opened the cupboard door. He reached inside and took out a mug, holding it delicately at its base with his fingertips. He turned it over, inspecting it, before placing it under his nose and sniffing it. He jerked the mug away from his face immediately and blinked, before an exasperated smile widened on his face.

He gingerly put the mug back into the cupboard, with its poisoned lined insides, giving it an almost fond look. Ever since Durand had invited a friend over to his house as a guest for a few days, they had come to stay at Fere Asper's place. And every day had been like this. The trio could only assume that it had become a habit for their

teacher to try to kill them, by any means possible it seemed. Ron fondly called it 'passive killing'. They didn't know, or really cared for that matter, whether there was another cause beyond their training. Perhaps the man felt guilty? Or felt a sudden moral obligation to rid the earth of them? They didn't dare ask Fere anyhow.

The red-headed boy checked another mug, deemed it safe, and jumped down from the stool to the tiled floor. He mobilised the coffee machine and filled his mug. As he sat down at the table, he saw Hermione walk through the doorway, yawning behind a hand, her hair a spiky mess. She sat down opposite him, withdrew a small pistol, then systematically took it apart to clean, eyeing her work blearily.

'Watch out for the green cup in the cupboard,' Ron said, wrapping a hand around his mug, while the other was in the process of prying a cigarette box open. 'It's got poison on it.'

Hermione made a noise of distaste, which the boy decided to take as acknowledgment.

Putting an unlit cigarette between his lips, Ron smirked. 'Just warning you.'

She stilled and glared up at him. 'I already know about the bloody mug, you asshole.'

'I see,' he flicked his lighter and lit his cigarette. 'Any other handy tips about the death-traps you forgot to mention?' He breathed in, then blew out a cloud of smoke.

Hermione inserted bullet after bullet into the round, her expression deadpan. 'Nope. Thought you'd appreciate the challenge.'

Ron lifted his mug to his lips, his grin hidden by the rim of it. 'Why thank you, Miss Granger. How considerate of you.' He thought about

telling her about the stab-detonator behind the shower knobs, but concluded that the girl could learn that lesson all by herself. And painfully at that.

'G'morning,' came a mumble from the doorway into the kitchen. Both Ron and Hermione turned to see Harry rubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands. He slid into the seat between his two bonded, glaring at the tabletop. After a few moments, his gaze moved over to Ron's cup of coffee and the glare deepened.

Chuckling, Ron said, 'Don't be lazy now, mate.'

Harry looked up the red-head and his eyes narrowed.

'Or be greedy,' Ron added quickly.

'I was awake two hours ago, unlike you.' Harry took in a deep breath. 'Bloody target decided to be bloody well late by five hours and thirty-two bloody minutes.'

Ron took a sip, 'Ah.'

They sat in silence, besides the small metallic clinks as Hermione put her pistol back together again. Ron took another sip of his steaming coffee, deciding to contemplate the foamy surface of his beverage than face Harry's glare. After a long sigh, the dark-haired boy got up and clambered up onto the stool to get to the cupboard.

'Don't take the green one,' Ron said just as Harry reached inside.

The boy frowned at him over his shoulder. 'I told you about that one yesterday.'

Ron's eyes widened slightly and Hermione sniggered, causing the red-head to give her a look, 'Let's not mention this one, okay?'

'Of course not,' Hermione answered in a highly amused voice, cocking her pistol deftly.

'You're going to, are you?'

She grinned, aiming the gun at him playfully. 'Perhaps. Most definitely a probable outcome, if any.'

'Bitch.'

'Bastard.'

'You-'

Harry brought his mug down on the table hard, 'Both of you – shut up! It's far too early for this crap . . .'

'Agreed,' a man growled from behind them. All three children swung round to face Fere Asper, who stood lazily with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. He had a grubby mug in one hand and was scratching the stubble on his jaw with the other.

'Welcome back to the world, sir,' Hermione said brightly, as she slipped her pistol under the table and onto her lap. 'You look positively lovely today.' She gave his rumpled, slept-in clothes and limp hair a sardonic once over.

Fere grunted in reply, flinging open a cabinet door, tugging out a bottle of whiskey. He plonked himself inelegantly onto the last remaining chair around the table, twisting the bottle open with his teeth. They watched as he poured a very liberal amount of alcohol into the dregs of his black coffee, nearly filling the mug to the brim.

He took a large swig of his drink. 'How long are you brats gonna keep on bumming off me?' he asked, after wincing slightly from the sharp alcoholic pang.

'Four more days,' Hermione answered as she scratched the back of her neck, messing up her hair more than before.

Fere looked up at them, dark rings under red veined eyes, and was silent for a moment. He sighed tiredly, irritably, and said, 'Then you better get to work.'

'Another job already?'

'What can I say? You three are disgustingly popular,' he replied, before making a face at his polluted coffee. He fumbled around in his jacket pockets and withdrew a file, throwing it across the tabletop offhandedly.

Ron and Hermione huddled around Harry, standing at his sides, looking over his shoulders. All three of them started, though they did not show it, when they saw the name across the first page.

'What did they target do?' Harry asked quietly.

Fere stilled and frowned. In all the time he had known these children, beyond the initial test, they had never once asked why. They never went outside their orders, never uttered questions about the people they had killed. They had never asked for more than just the information their employers offered.

'She had some dealings with the wrong crowd and didn't pay up, in the best of cases apparently. You can imagine how displeased certain people are at the moment.' Fere pushed a clump of hair away from his face as he asked. 'Know her?'

Harry didn't look up from the file, 'Had the unfortunate honour, yes.'

Hermione plucked Ron's cigarette from his hand and took a long drag. 'We are mildly acquainted with her spawn.'

Their teacher's eyes widened fractionally. He glanced between them, then said slowly, 'You can refuse the request . . . it is not an imperative.'

'No, no,' Harry murmured, as he stared down at the picture before him. 'This one is mine.'

And standing in that picture was Narcissa Malfoy.

xXx

It was dark, but Dobby knew where to go.

His Master had given him a task, one that was important. Dobby knew that if he failed it in any way, it would be more than just a beating, more than anything he could inflict upon himself, as punishment. He shuddered in his pillow-case, his small, bare feet on the cold ground. In his most unworthy hands he held Master's important object. Even if he knew that Master had given him this task, he would have to shut his ears in the oven door for touching what he wasn't allowed to even look at. He was a bad house elf. Master said so every day.

Dobby peered up at the glowing, warm light that flooded out of a large window. Through it, he could see a big witch, and a small witch. His Master had been very specific – he had to give it to the small witch. The one who cried out in the night and fought against the sheets. The small witch was special. She needed Master's special object.

The house elf looked down with tennis-ball sized eyes at the wrapped up object in his hands. He was a bad, bad house elf. He didn't like the object. Not one bit. But Master had given him a task. With that thought, he clicked his fingers and popped up into the small witch's dark bedroom. He left the object on her desk, within sight.

As he turned to pop away again, he decided to try to warn Neville Longbottom again. He was a bad house elf, but his Master's master was even worse.

xXx

Author's Note: Ello! This is the start of Part Two: Second Year. I skimmed through Chambers of Secrets a while ago, and I realised that I had forgotten how chilling the book was (for, well, a kid's book :P). This part of the story marks the start of diverging stories of other characters, like parts from Snape's perspective, Draco's and Neville's, beyond that of the trio's.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed this new instalment! :)

Chapter 22: The Command

Clasped in one hand, Harry held a cup of coffee. He ran a pale finger along the rim of the cup, over and over, his skin touched by the steam that ascended from within. The one thing he had missed at Hogwarts had been the freedom of making his own coffee – completely black, no sugar and sharply bitter. The only coffee the school had provided had been tainted by milk, and therefore, in his opinion, disgusting. He let his roving hand fall to the cup's hot side, before taking a sip of the coffee.

He laid the cup on the top of his thigh and looked up. He stared across at Hermione, who sat silent and still at a desk, her one arm resting next to a piece of parchment. His gaze found the faint blue thread of magic around her wrist and followed it to the parchment, to which it disappeared into.

'How's it going?' he asked, breaking the steady silence that had hung over them.

'Nothing much,' she replied. 'Our precious hero has been in the bathroom for quite some time.' She glanced up at him, her face completely deadpan. 'I think it's a bad case of constipation, if you ask me.'

Harry grinned. 'Ah. I see.'

The girl shrugged a shoulder, feigning indifference, though he could see the twinkle in her eye. 'Nothing we can help with. Poor blighter has to deal with it himself.'

Harry lifted his cup, hiding his smirk behind it. 'Though, one can be certain that the Wizarding World would do anything to appease its hero.'

'Hah, picking up his shit would be a most enlightening experience, to

be sure,' she snorted, looking down the map once again. 'Then perhaps they'd realise his lack of divinity. But even then I wouldn't get my hopes up.'

'Well, the masses need a legend,' he murmured, after draining his cup of coffee. 'They need a martyr.' He closed his eyes, and pressed the side of the cup to his cheek, smiling. 'They need something, any someone, even if that person is a little boy with a little scar.'

The dark-haired boy heard Hermione sigh. He opened his eyes to peer at her, to see one of her hands brush back her hair and then pull her eye-patch over her ear. He stared back into her eyes, into brown and white, and his smile faded.

'Harry, you know that you don't have to do this,' she said quietly. 'Not now.'

He looked away, to the floor. 'Yes . . . yes, I do.'

'We can achieve this at another date, at another time. There is no reason for it now.'

'By having this chance is reason enough.' He leaned forward, and placed his cup on the table, its clatter resounding softly. 'We may never have this opportunity again.'

'Bullshit,' she spat out, slamming her fist onto the desk. 'We can make opportunities happen. You know that! You know that very well.'

The boy glanced up at her, his green eyes unforgiving and relentless. 'We take what is given too, remember? And plus, will we be paid for it next time?' He stood up and walked to the door, before saying over his shoulder, 'Come, we have things to do, Hermione. You can watch Longbottom another time.'

'I will not stand by as you let our plans crumble because of petty

retaliations, you bastard!' she hissed, her hands curling into fists. 'You want revenge, but so do we. You want him to hurt like you did, like we did, but this indirect way that will endanger us all will account to nothing but more difficulties. It may even hinder us. And most of all - does she even deserve this risk?'

She couldn't see his face, but the bond answered her question even before his voice did.

'Yes, every second of it.'

xXx

By the thick, concrete wall, they stood side by side. Their hoods were pulled forward, and by way of a spell, their faces could not be seen by any others, but themselves. Their heights were the only thing that could be discerned from their identity and even then, this information did not comfort their enemies in any way. They were half in shadow, half in the dim golden light of a single bulb hanging from the ceiling.

'Has she arrived?' Harry asked, his tone flat.

'Not yet, but she will,' a fat, middle-aged man answered. He smoothed his moustache and sucked on a thick cigar. 'I made an offer she can't resist.'

'Make sure she came alone,' the boy added as he looked across at the door. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw smoke filter out from Ron's hood and as a small, gloved hand fell to his side. He glanced at Hermione, ignoring the flares of anger bursting from her through the bond, and saw her hand tighten around the hilt of her dagger.

The man stared at them through heavy-lidded eyes, tapping ash onto the ground. With his free hand, he loosened his tie. 'Are you guys willing to join us for dinner? Before, you know . . .' He gestured loosely.

Harry pulled his pistol out, and armed it with a round of ammo. As he cocked it, making the man flinch in barely concealed fright, he said quietly, 'We are here to be paid with your money, sir. Not to be poisoned under the guise of civility.'

The man went completely pale and dropped his cigar, his hands shaking so. Even when the man could not see those eyes on him, he could feel them and their intent. He scrambled off to the door and disappeared through it, after saying, 'S-she may have a-arrived.'

They stood there in silence for a long moment, before Ron slid forward and picked up the man's forgotten cigar. He sneered at it after inspecting it, 'Typical. Cheap quality.' He threw it to the floor.

'Hermione,' Harry murmured, not looking at her. 'Now.'

The girl shot a scowl at him, but nevertheless whispered a spell, moving her wand under her cloak. She glanced up at the glinting glass lens in the upper corner of the room, near the ceiling. 'The cameras are offline as of now. They won't be for long, once the back-up system kicks in.'

The two boys nodded as one. As Harry gripped the door-handle, Ron stilled and looked to the side, to the wall and what lay beyond it. 'She's in the building. She passed through the detection wards.'

'Lead the way,' Harry said, opening it for his bonded.

They slipped out of the room and their gazes darted from end of the passageway to the other. Not far from where they were, two large, burly men stood guarding a door.

'Stop! Who's there?' one of the guards yelled out when the trio let themselves be seen.

'Oi, what are kids doin' here?' the other whispered loudly.

Hermione took the lead and walked to the men, stopping just before the door. 'Is your boss on the other side?'

'That's none of your damn business, kiddo. Get away,' the large man said, putting his arm before the door, barring her way through. The girl looked up at him, her eyes empty.

'You children shouldn't be here. This is no playground.'

Within a breath, she had barrel of a gun stabbing into his gut. When the other man made to lunge at her, she pressed her weapon harder into his partner, making him choke out a gasp. 'Move another inch, and I'll splatter his insides all over the wall.'

Hermione's hand twitched around the handle, her finger so close to pulling the trigger. But both men were deathly still and watching her with wide, wide eyes. She withdrew her weapon with an almost painful slowness, then swiftly brought it down on the man's upheld arm. He howled in pain, stumbling backwards, clutching at his wrist.

'We're the Devil's Spawn,' she hissed. 'We go where ever we want.'

She took the handle into her grasp and opened the door, feeling through the bond that Harry and Ron were not far behind as she entered the room. What lay before them was a table, laden with food, and two people sitting at it. Their employer jerked his head in their direction.

'Ah, I forgot to mention, dear Narcissa, that there were some people dying to meet you,' the middle-aged man said, the effect of his smirk diminished by the pale shade his skin had taken. 'My apologies, but really, what host would I be if I denied them the pleasure?'

Narcissa Malfoy sat there, completely still, her posture perfect. Her

long blonde hair had been pulled up into an intricate bun at the nape of her neck and her clothes, out of place in their muggle-fashion, were prim and pressed. She stared at the man on the other side of the table long and hard, before turning her gaze to Harry, Ron and Hermione.

'You said we'd be alone,' she said in a forbidding tone. Her eyes were pale blue, sharp and cold.

The man grinned, and opened his mouth to speak, but Harry cut him off. 'Out.'

He gave them a disbelieving look. 'What?' He pointed at himself. 'Me?'

'Out,' Harry repeated, his eyes locked onto the woman before him. 'Before you lose far more than just your supper tonight.'

The man stared at them, terrified, before he ran from the room. The sound of his fast footfalls echoed, till they disappeared from his wake and they were left in silence. Harry watched the woman all the while, as her hand slowly moved from her lap to her side – where her wand presumably was.

'How much did he pay you?' she asked suddenly, her face clear of expression. 'I can pay you all far more than anything he'd offer, or even dream of.'

'It's not just the money, Mrs Malfoy,' Harry said softly. He pulled back his hood, then brushed back his dark hair to reveal his lightning bolt scar. 'It's because of the memories too.'

'No,' she whispered, slipping out of her chair. 'They told me that you were dead. Dead!'

He whipped up his wand and whispered, 'Expelliarmus!' Narcissa's

wand shot out of her hand, and Hermione caught it. Ron spun round, just as the woman tried to make a break for the door, and shouted, 'Colloportus!'

The door slammed shut in her face and she hit it with her fists.

'Oh how the mighty have fallen,' Harry said, his wand still trained on her. 'What is a great Malfoy such as yourself doing fraternising with muggles? Really,' he shook his head with a mock frown, 'of all things, Narcissa. Of all things.'

'How?' She turned and stared at the boy before her in disbelief. 'How did you survive?'

'I just did,' his green eyes flashed in anger. 'Certainly without your help. Like you ever gave it. No, I wasn't even worth touching apparently.' He took a step forward and her eyes widened. 'You just left me there every day. You knew. You knew fucking well what he did to me and you did nothing. Mercy was beneath you, so utterly plebeian.'

'No, I-'

'You must face the consequence of your actions,' he spat out, his face twisting with hate. 'You refused my plea of death and now I bring death to you.'

As one, through the bond, they channeled their magic into a single spell, unleashing it with a word: 'Imperio!'

xXx

Severus Snape sat in the morning light that shone through large, dusty windows. Between his two hands, he held a newspaper that had moving pictures all over its pages. His dark eyes moved from left to right rapidly, without pause, under a deep frown. After a moment of

reading, he folded the Daily Prophet closed and stared at the front page, his gaze thoughtful.

He reread the headline again and gave out a near inaudible sigh. In large letters, the words, 'Lady Malfoy Kills Herself?!' stretched themselves across the page blatantly.

'Anything interesting?' Durand Orexis asked as he came into the kitchen. Severus wordlessly placed the newspaper on the table and turned it in the other's direction.

Durand's eyes widened slightly. 'Suicide?'

Severus crossed his arms and looked out of the window. 'This does not bode well.'

He sat down and stared at the newspaper in disbelief, asking, 'Are they sure it was suicide?'

'Some suspect foul play.'

'Of course they do,' Durand muttered, giving a derisive snort. 'Many are linked to the Malfoys, and they don't want their precious reputations to be trashed because of this.'

The potions professor reached forward and started smoothing out crinkles on the page with long fingers. 'Perhaps,' he murmured. 'But maybe it's for the sake of her son.'

'Or incase this publicity may anger Lucius in any way,' Durand retorted. 'About the son, I can't see bureaucrats being that sensitive. They're too lazy.'

'I suppose.'

'What's wrong with you? You've been too quiet and . . . un-bastardly

today. It's morning and you're not grumpy.'

Severus looked at him then, his expression unreadable. 'I teach her son. He goes to Hogwarts.'

Durand sighed, brushing back hair from his face tiredly. 'I know. But that is neither here nor now, Severus. You won't have to deal with him for a while yet.'

The dark-haired man sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. 'Yes, that is true. Over speculation will probably make things worse.'

'And take you away from your studies,' Durand added. He shifted in his chair to get comfortable and asked, 'Where were you when I got back yesterday? You weren't in even when I went to bed at midnight.'

'I was catching up with old acquaintances. Asking around too.' Severus opened his eyes and brought his gaze firmly onto his friend's. 'A few of my students have caught my attention.'

The corner of Durand's mouth curled up, 'Poor them.'

Severus ignored him, then asked, 'Do you know of, or have any information on Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley?'

Durand stilled momentarily and then shook his head. 'No, I don't think so.' He frowned down at the tabletop. 'Why are you asking me of all people? You know that children aren't my forte.'

'I was told you know them.'

'And who told you that?'

'The barman at Gambit. Ganar was his name,' Severus said carefully.

Durand suddenly chuckled. 'You can never trust a half-breed, my friend. Especially Ganar, that sly bastard. He'd say anything for a coin.'

'I see,' the tall man said slowly. 'So you know nothing of them?'

'Besides the fact that they are your students, nothing.'

xXx

I'm fine when I'm not alone. I have a reason then to laugh at jokes, to smile when smiled at and be alive when surrounded by life. But at the end of the day, they leave me and I feel nothing. There is only darkness curling out from my belly, outwards and inwards, to every part of me. That darkness is like a cancer, slow and terminal. It's eating me alive and leaving nothing. Absolutely nothing.

There is no point anymore. It's all so fucking pointless.

xXx

Chapter 23 – Dawning Darkness

A lone boy stood in the open doorway, watching the dawn glow rise up the walls slowly. He had one small hand on the doorframe, which, every now and again, its grip tightened around it, then loosened. The breaths that slipped out of his slightly parted lips were soft and soundless. He felt like a ghost, insubstantial, a near-forgotten memory, in the face of the rising sun. But it was something he watched each day now regardless, because sleep danced to and fro from him teasingly. Perhaps it was for the best, he mused at times, for he didn't want to return to those haunted dreams, to awake to those moments of stark grief and piercing sense of loss.

He turned and glanced over his shoulder to look at his bedroom. It was so dark, so cold and unwelcome. It did not feel like it was his own. Even with the warm light of dawn, the feeling of emptiness that filled the room did not lift. There were too many memories there. The boy let his arm fall to his side limply. He had no need to hold onto something that would not sustain him – so the action, the tightening of flexing muscles in his hand, was of no use. It served no purpose. Like so many things these days.

The boy brushed a strand of blond hair behind his ear, pausing to lay his hand on his neck, the cold of his fingers seeping into his skin. He sighed, lowering his gaze as the light of the new day became level with his. He slipped his hands into his pockets and silently made his way down the passageway. He passed quiet statues and wide glass windows, but he did so without looking at them, only gazing straight ahead.

He went down a stairway, then walked through into a chamber that held a long, narrow table. The boy looked up at only person in the room, a man, who sat on the far side of the table. The man was half in shadows, the one side of his long face in the light that shot in from between parted curtains. There was a dark circle under the man's visible eye, one that spoke of little sleep and even less of happier

times.

'Father,' the boy said quietly, straightening as he quickly took his hands out of his pockets. 'Good morning.'

The man didn't move. After a long moment of silence, he lifted a wine glass to his lips and took a sip. The bottle at his side was empty. His grey eyes were unseeing, not in thought, not in sadness, but in something that was wholly unreadable. The boy shivered - sometimes, as he curled into himself at night, he thought that he saw nothing in his father's eyes.

It was painful to see his father like this. Especially when he had known him to be so strong, so unbreakable. He had seemed like a work of art, an object of perfection that the boy had strived to be like. His father had been all he wanted to be. He had been so proud . . .

But now, as he stared at this shell of a man, he knew that it only took one course of action of another to break the strength he had so admired, so cherished and envied. It had only taken one sentence to rip away the foundation of his father's life.

Draco didn't want to be like his father anymore. He didn't want to be weak like him.

xXx

The scenery sped past in a blur as the Hogwarts Express chugged down the tracks, leaving a plume of smoke that spread out above the train and filtered into the cloudy sky. Within one of the many compartments sat three children, in a mulling silence.

Harry tapped his fingers on the window-pane impatiently, before glancing up. He fisted his hand and put it in his lap. 'Hermione, look at me.'

Across from him, the one-eyed girl remained silent, ignoring him. She had a piece of parchment on the top of her thighs, her fingers nimbly dancing across its surface. With each movement of her fingertips, the image upon the page was tugged downwards in her chosen direction.

Harry looked down at the faint blue thread around her wrist, which trailed back to the parchment and disappeared into it. 'Hermione,' he repeated, barely reining in his exasperation.

'Shut up.'

He glared at her. 'No, I won't. You've been staring at that goddamn map for hours now.'

'He's not on the train.'

'So? I'm sure Longbottom can take care of himself. Or at least we can be sure that his fans will,' Harry snapped.

Hermione's fingers stilled and she looked up at him. A frustrated anger flashed in her eye. 'Shut up already.' She shook her head slightly, her gaze falling down to the parchment once more. 'Fuck, you can be annoying at times, Harry.'

'Annoying?' he hissed, his green eyes narrowing. 'Annoying? What about you? You're the one who made us watch the little Golden Boy all summer, day and night. We've had to endure another one of your little projects again, for the whole fucking holidays. Longbottom this, Longbottom that!'

Hermione's face twisted, as she half-rose, her fist tight and raised. But suddenly, Ron grabbed her arm and tugged her back into her seat, his expression clearly showing he was not impressed. 'Stop it. Right now. You two have been at each other's throat for a while now, I know that, but for god's sake don't take it all out here. Have the

discipline at least to wait till Hogwarts to beat the shit out of one another, okay?'

Both Harry and Hermione looked away from each other, scowling darkly.

'We have to find out how Longbottom hurt Quirrell, how he forced Voldemort to flee from his host body,' Hermione said quietly, determinedly. 'That boy has power, I'm sure of it.'

Before Harry could say anything scathing, Ron cut him off, 'I know, Hermione. You have explained it to us many times. And I understand your reasoning.'

The red head turned to his dark-haired bonded, his expression reproachful. 'And you'd do well to see that, mate. Getting angry at her because she got angry at you is no excuse.'

'But she-'

Ron held up a hand. 'You're not the only one in the wrong here, Harry, okay?' Cold blue eyes found brown. 'We made a choice, and whether it was right or wrong, we have to stick to it – together. We all have our own demons to face - never forget that.'

Hermione appeared stunned for a moment, then cleared her face of expression. She watched as Ron took a long drag from his cigarette and blew out slowly, his head tilted back.

'You have been both hiding from the bond for a while now and you know that doing so won't solve anything. Frankly,' Ron said firmly. 'It's been bloody annoying. I should be the one yelling at Hermione, not Harry. It's just not right.'

That cracked a few small smiles. Ron chuckled behind his cigarette and looked out of the window again, his eyes suddenly bright. He

could feel the guilty release of the bond and the sudden rush of emotions that were not his own, but very familiar and comforting. It was like he was wading through warm water after sitting under a biting cold spray.

'We've been stupid, right?' Hermione asked, her face a mixture of a frown and a smile.

'Very much so,' was the quick, muttered retort. The girl laughed and tried to smack the red-head, to which he dodged with practiced ease.

'But I'm still going to give you one helluva bruise,' Harry said sullenly, crossing his arms.

'Oh, bring it on, bitch,' Hermione replied, flashing him a wicked grin.

Harry breathed a deep, calming sigh and said levelly, 'Make that several massive bruises.'

She smirked. 'Only if you can catch me.'

Harry huffed in indignation. She looked down at the map on her lap and sobered, her smile gone. 'But seriously, I have a bad feeling about this.'

Ron tapped off the ash of his cigarette out of the window, 'Since last year, with the Stone and all, Longbottom may be travelling separately from the other students.' He shrugged a shoulder. 'For safety's sake, perhaps?'

'I doubt it,' Hermione said with a frown. 'The threat of Voldemort is too obscure, too flimsy for the Board, or the parents, to agree with that. They'd see it as favouritism, since Dumbledore never made it public about what happened to Quirrell. You read our letters – 'We are sad to announce that Professor Quirrell has resigned from his position of Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts to continue with his

travels. . . '

Harry made a snort of disgust. 'Travels? The only travelling that bastard did was to hell.'

The side of Hermione's mouth curled upwards, 'Perhaps they thought it prudent to hide the fact that one of their employees was murdered right under their noses - in custody, without magic.' A grin spread across her face.

'And not to mention, the poor victim was a Death Eater too,' Ron piped in as he flicked open his lighter.

Harry hummed in mock-thought, his eyes twinkling. 'Yes, I can see now why. Clever little buggers, aren't they?'

xXx

In the Great Hall, they sat side by side near the very end of the Slytherin table. As it had been last year, they found that none would make space for them along the bench and those close inched away as if they were diseased. Their expressions clearly showed how unwelcome they were, and the open disbelief that the three of them had dared to come back – into their pure-blooded, proper midst. Ron, Harry and Hermione breezed by the unmasked disgust, the curling sneers and muttered insults without a change in their expressions.

The Sorting came and went, the first years dispersing into their new houses, as Ron sat quietly at Harry's side. He had watched the line of small children as they had wandered in the hall, eyes wide and bright with wonder. He had listened to every decision of the Hat, and memorised each and every little, innocent face. He sat there, imagining how one girl, who was long gone, would've reacted to the magical ceiling of the Great Hall, or how she would've squealed in delight when she would've seen the ghosts gliding through the walls. He sat there, his face clear of emotion, eyes hard, as he thought of

Ginny.

She should've been here. Right this day, she should've been in that line, in and amongst those happy faces . . . Laughing, not wearing her last smile . . .

Harry glanced at him, feeling the discontent of the bond and took Ron's hand into his own under the table. For a moment, Ron's hand lay limp in his, before it slowly curled around Harry's and tightened. Hermione glanced their way, before giving a small nod and a wave of understanding along the bond.

Along on the High Table, they were not alone in noticing that Severus Snape was absent from his usual seat. There were nasty murmurs all over the hall over the odds of his much wanted demise, or at least retirement, if nothing else. As Dumbledore proclaimed the yearly announcements, it did not escape their notice that Professor McGonagall's mouth was pursed in a thin line and how her constant glances at the doors betrayed her anxiousness.

'And without further ado, I am proud to introduce your new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, Gilderoy Lockhart!' the Headmaster exclaimed, a twinkle in his eyes. When a young, wavy-haired man stood, a sigh, mostly made by the female population, sounded audibly. He flashed all below and before him a dazzling smile.

'Hello, dear Hogwarts!' he gave an over-done bow with much twirling of hands. 'I can assure you all, that the pleasure is all mine to be teaching the future generation of this world! One such as myself has the skills, and more - never fear - to ensure a well-rounded education to each and every person in this hall!'

Applause thundered all around them in response and Lockhart took his seat once more, an overly-pleased smile plastered onto his face. Hermione forced herself not to cover her ears – the din was painful, but not something she couldn't handle. She was smiling inside,

thinking of the stinking fear that Lockhart had reeked of when she had whispered about murder into his ears. The power she had over him made her feel a lot better about dealing with his pompousness, or lack of expertise.

When the food of the Welcoming Feast appeared before them on the tabletop, Harry noticed the direction of Hermione's gaze. She was looking at the Gryffindor Table, her hand and fork frozen in midair, her eye narrowed fractionally. Harry followed her gaze to find Dean Thomas, sitting alone and looking very worried. The look Hermione shot him was a very clear 'I-told-you-so.'

As the dinner progressed, a rumour slowly made its way down the Slytherin Table and came within hearing distance of the trio.

'Did you hear? Apparently Longbottom and Finnigan came to Hogwarts in one of those horrible muggle creations – a motor car, was it? It flew too! Imagine that!'

'That's preposterous! Those muggle things can't fly.'

'They can with magic, I'm sure. It's true – they were sighted over London by six muggles who later had to be Obliviated . . . '

Harry shared a look with his bonded, before they returned to their meal. Harry changed his expression to that of boredom, with a slight sneer, as he pondered. If it was true – why didn't Longbottom and his friend get on the Hogwarts Express? A flying car sounded foolish, not the kind of safety measure Dumbledore would put in place for one so famous as Neville Longbottom, the Boy-Who-Lived. No, there had to be a reason, perhaps beyond the obvious 'seeking attention' excuse Snape so loved. Maybe that unidentified presence, that house-elf, who had watched Longbottom all summer, was key?

xXx

Sometimes, when the night seems as dark as the one inside me, it seems like it would be so easy. I could just close my eyes and it would end. The darkness would recede, taking my everything with it. There'd be no God, or Hell awaiting me, because there would be nothing. No salvation or damnation. No light or darkness to cover me, to blind me, to consume me. I'd be nothing, sweet nothing.

But then I open my eyes and I'm still alive.

I don't know what to do. Even dreaming is hard now.

Chapter 24 - Existence

He slowly walked down the dungeon passageway, with no-one at his side. He listened to the sounds of his footsteps, counting them, watching them. The cobbled floor blurred under his feet as he moved. He tried to hear nothing but the in and out of breaths, the footsteps falling one after the other . . . but he couldn't. As he walked, people stopped talking. He could hear the silence. Their silence.

It was so full of the things they did not say. It was suffocating in pity.

A sneer fitted onto his face. The fools. They pitied a Malfoy? There was no point in even the effort. He didn't need them, or their unwelcome pity. He didn't need their condolences, their letters of sorrow. He didn't need their fake sadness, their counsel, their therapy. He didn't need anyone, especially a weak father like his own.

'Oi! Malfoy!'

He turned his head, to see a group of boys by the wall. They were grinning. One of them called out to him, 'Do us all a favour and join your dear mother the same way, won't ya? It would make the Common Room a brighter place, for sure.' They laughed amongst themselves, clapping the speaker on the shoulders and back.

He sneered at them – at their vindictive faces, their expectant, vicious eyes. But he said nothing, feeling strangely numb. He turned back and stalked away. Over and over in his head, as they laughed loudly behind him, he told himself that they were nothing. Utterly worthless. Nothing, nothing, nothing . . .

But as he sat down for breakfast in the Great Hall, he stared down at the knife next to his plate. He remembered her slit wrists, so pale, and the black blood drying on skin and blade alike.

He didn't use the knife. He couldn't touch it.

xXx

Harry buttered his toast with no haste whatsoever as he, and seemingly the entire hall, listened in on a very animated Howler. From the shouts and angry yells erupting from the red letter, it was clear that it belonged to Seamus Finnigan.

' . . . STEALING THE CAR, I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SURPRISED IF THEY'D EXPELLED YOU! YOU JUST WAIT TILL I GET HOLD OF YOU, MISTER. I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU STOPPED TO THINK WHAT I WENT THROUGH WHEN IT HAD GONE – YOUR FATHER ALMOST HAD A HEARTATTACK . . . '

Finnigan had sunk low in his seat, his face red with shame. Dean Thomas sat at his side, looking torn between being disproving and sympathetic.

' . . . WE DIDN'T BRING YOU UP TO BEHAVE LIKE THIS! YOU AND NEVILLE COULD BOTH HAVE DIED! I AM ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED – IF YOU PUT ANOTHER TOE OUT OF LINE I'LL BRING YOU STRAIGHT BACK HOME!'

A deafeningly silence fell. Longbottom was looking resolutely down at his half-eaten plate, a guilt-ridden expression on his round face. The Howler burst into flames and curled into ashes, its remains falling onto the table in a pile. Slowly, people started laughing, before talk sprung up again.

'Well, that certainly cleared things up,' Harry said dryly. He glanced at Hermione, who sat at his side. Her expression plainly showed her displeasure. The skin around her eye was pulled tight as she narrowed her eye.

'It did,' she said flatly. 'Very clearly, very loudly.'

The corner of Ron's mouth twitched upwards. 'Come, we've got class soon.'

Hermione looked up at him. 'Is it my favourite lesson?' she asked sarcastically, folding her arms over her chest.

Harry chuckled as he got up, 'Perhaps, though what you make of it will conclude that.'

She grinned. 'Then I have your guys' permission to amuse myself?'

'As long as you adhere to the limit,' Ron answered. When he saw her grin widen, he rolled his eyes. 'Don't be pedantic now.'

'Aw, that takes the fun out of it,' she said as she slid out her chair and followed them out of the hall. 'The wording of rules and limits need to be very clear. Otherwise I'll bend them to suit me.'

'Well then,' Harry carried on dryly, 'Don't murder or maim or let memories stay. That clear enough for you?'

She chuckled. 'Simple too. Nice, Mr Potter.'

'It's always my pleasure.'

They walked in silence through the hallways after that, the bond humming with their shared amusement. They scaled the moving staircases, passed groups of chattering students and floating ghosts, and finally rounded in on the corridor that lead to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. They had taken but a few steps, before they stilled as one at the sound of voices and shrank back into the shadows of a line of suits of armour.

' - Neville, Neville. When I heard – well, of course, it was my fault. Could have kicked myself.'

Hermione frowned. She knew that voice – it was Gilderoy Lockhart.

'Don't know when I've been more shocked. Flying a car to Hogwarts! Well, of course, I knew at once why you'd done it. Stood out a mile. Neville, Neville, Neville.' There was slight pause, a brief silence, before he carried on. 'Gave you a taste for publicity, didn't I? Gave you the bug. You got onto the front page of the paper with me and you couldn't wait to do it again.'

'Professor, no, you see-'

Hermione nearly smiled. They, and the entire wizarding world, had seen the photograph on the Daily Prophet's front page, from only a few months ago, of Lockhart and Longbottom in Flourish & Botts. Even an idiot could see how uncomfortable and irritated Longbottom had been standing there after he had been practically forced into posing for the picture.

'Neville, I understand. It's natural to want a bit more once you've had that first taste – and I blame myself for giving you that, because it was bound to go to your head – but see here, young man, you can't start flying cars to try and get yourself noticed. Plenty of time for all that when you're older! Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking! "It's all right for him, he's an internationally famous wizard already!" But when I was twelve, I was just as much of a nobody as you are now. In fact, I'd say even more of a nobody! I mean, a few people have heard of you, haven't they? All that business with He Who Must Not Be Named! I know, I know, it's not quite as good as winning Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award five times in a row, as I have – but it's a start, Neville, it's a start.'

Hermione stifled a snort a few times, but nearly laughed outright as Ron and Harry's disbelief mounted with each word. All of them could hardly believe it – the man's audacity! The fame of Gilderoy Lockhart next to that of Neville Longbottom's . . . it was sheer stupidity to even try to compare them. The arrogance of this little man with his passing

fame was astounding. When Lockhart was long gone, Longbottom's story would be the stuff of legends.

'Now, come along, lad,' Lockhart carried on, an air of satisfaction to his voice like a job well done. 'Hop to class!'

Hermione bit her lip to stop from smiling. The bout of silence lay palpably for a few moments, before Longbottom coughed and said, 'I have your class first, professor.'

'Ah. Well, make yourself comfortable then! Come along!'

She swung round to face her bonded and grinned. They listened to the retreating footsteps, before she raised her eyebrow. Ron took in a deep breath with a roll of his eyes.

'My god,' he said, looking off to the side as he shook his head.

Harry put a hand on Hermione's shoulder, and stared at her seriously. 'If you need help making an utter arse out of him, just say and I'll jump.'

Hermione's grin widened. 'Thanks.'

xXx

'Me,' the man said, pointing at himself, before giving the silent class before him a hearty wink, 'Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, third class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defence League and five times winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award – but I won't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon banshee by smiling at her!'

Harry peaked out from behind his strategically placed pile of 'text' books, which handily took a certain grinning idiot from view, and saw a few people smile weakly at the joke. He glanced at Hermione, who

sat in the row next to him, her arms crossed over her chest. She was watching Lockhart closely, under the guise of being an attentive student, and Harry knew she was planning. The small glint in her eye betrayed her, like always.

The dark-haired boy lay his head on his arms on his desk, intent on having a nap, but the words 'little quiz' came out of the blond idiot's mouth and he had to sit up straight. Ron slid a potion book out of view as Lockhart came close.

'Here you go,' Lockhart said cheerfully as he gave them their test papers. He turned to the rest of the class with a small clap of his hands. 'You have thirty minutes. Start - now.'

Harry gave Ron a side-long look, and got a roll of eyes in return. He huffed, then looked down at the first question.

1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favourite colour?

Harry ran his eyes over the next few questions in disbelief. All of the questions were about Lockhart, all three double-sided pages of them. He could barely hold back the snort of disgust rising up in him. He looked over at Hermione, when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye, and saw her raise her hand high up in the air. Her expression was neutral, mildly curious.

Lockhart shot a smile at her, 'Yes, Mr . . .?'

'It's Miss Granger, sir,' Hermione corrected absently. She shifted in her seat, as if she was uncomfortable. 'You see, Professor, I'm having difficulty with something . . .'

Unabashed, Lockhart nodded, 'Go on.'

'How would the knowledge of your ideal Christmas present be helpful, in say, a dangerous situation?' she asked, innocent and attentive.

Lockhart blinked. 'Well, I just, um, wanted to see if you had read my books closely. Yes, close enough to be sure, that is.'

Harry hid a smile at the soft snickers that dotted and ran across the room. He glanced over at Hermione again and saw her nod thoughtfully, before frowning and saying, 'I'm sure one page would have sufficed, sir.'

A light pink rose onto Lockhart's cheeks. He pursed his lips and said, 'I will be the judge of that, Miss Granger.'

Hermione smiled. 'Of course, sorry, sir.' A pause, then, 'But will the rest of these little quizzes of yours follow the same pattern?' She shrugged ruefully. 'Just want a warning, I guess. You know, so I can study the right things. Like the shampoo product you use, rather than how to protect ourselves from dark curses.'

A small frown came onto Lockhart's face as a few more students snickered, this time more loudly. He coughed pointedly, and the class fell silent once more. 'My apologies,' he smiled suddenly, dazzlingly, 'I can't give you guys any clues as to what I'm testing you about – that'd be silly! Testing is all about the unknown. Putting you into situations that you can't prepare for, so you have to draw from the knowledge in - ' he tapped the side of his head, ' – here.'

'It just seems unfair, sir,' a Gryffindor piped in from the front row.

'So nothing short of stalking you,' another student added, 'will get us good marks, yeah?'

Lockhart gave a short, merry laugh. 'Good one, good one.' He beamed. 'And so, to business . . .' From behind his desk, he lifted a large, covered cage. As he put it on the tabletop, he looked at each and every student's face. 'Now – be warned! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind! You may find

yourselves facing your worst fears in this room. Know only that no harm can befall you whilst I am here. All I ask is that you remain calm.'

He whipped the cover off the cage with a flourish. The class let out their bated breathes as it was revealed that the cage only held the fast, blurring blue shapes of some sort of pixie. 'Yes,' Lockhart said in a low, dramatic tone of voice, 'Freshly caught Cornish pixies!'

Harry felt his mouth twitch into a sort of half-smile. He had to give the man credit for going all the way with his idiocy. But the smile disappeared very quickly the moment Lockhart flipped open the cage and let the pixies loose.

'Let's see what you make of them!' the man shouted over the sudden screams of the second years in the front row as they dived away to safety. Chaos broke out – glass showered down as a few pixies shot through the windows as they made a dash for freedom, ink bottles were thrown at cowering victims, waste bins were toppled, pictures shredded and books torn into confetti.

'Come on now, they're only pixies!' Lockhart shouted above the noises of pandemonium. 'Observe!' He whipped out his wand. 'Peskipiksi Pesternomi!'

Nothing happened.

Hermione tugged Ron under the desk they were hiding by, her hand twitching over her wand. All her instincts were screaming to eliminate the threat, to use the sudden adrenaline freed into her veins and to sate the rising blood-thirst. But the red-head at her side grabbed her arm and held it tight. He peered out, his face marred by a scowl.

'Harry's by the Golden Trio,' Ron whispered. 'Lockhart doesn't know what the fuck he's doing, so what we going to do?' He ducked suddenly when a pixie tried to dive bomb him.

'I'd flame-ball the blighters,' Hermione hissed angrily, wincing when another window shattered. 'Then give the bleeding idiot a dose of Crucio when no-one's looking.'

Ron barked out a laugh. 'Sorry, but in your dreams.'

The bell rang and en-mass, the class rushed to the exit, taking the chance. Lockhart was heading the group, without a backward glance. Hermione snatched a pixie out of the air, stopping its attempt at gnawing at her ear, and bit out a furious, 'Fuck!'

She stood up and whipped out her wand, casting three Freezing Charms in fast succession, causing pixies to plummet to the ground. She slashed her wand in wide movements, and cast another spell to freeze every object in the room.

Glass and pixies floated in mid-air. Hermione lowered her wand and turned to her bonded. In the empty classroom, she gave loud tsk, then said, 'Peskipiksi Pesternomi?' She shook her head, then she plucked a pixie out of the air absently. 'Even his made-up spells are stupid.'

Ron chuckled as he watched Hermione make the pixie strangle itself with its own blue little hands. 'He's creative, I'll give him that,' he finally said.

Hermione inspected her handiwork critically, before tightening the pixie's grip. 'He's too creative.'

Harry leant back against an upturned desk and smirked. 'Well, it's the first day, and we're already having fun.' Slowly, his smirk widened into a grin. 'I'm actually looking forward to this year. Aren't you?'

xXx

He flipped the coin over between his fingers, over and over again. Pensively, he stared into the flickering flames of his log-fire as he sat in his armchair. The glow of the fire made the coin glint golden in places. But Severus Snape's mind was far from his study and far from his work that lay on his desk.

As he had for all summer, and even before then, he was thinking of three certain students.

He had not learnt enough. For all his freely given coin to loosen tongues and catching up with old 'friends', he had found nothing. But he knew there was a secret – he had seen it when people had stiffened when he mentioned their names, in the way their eyes couldn't meet his own as they swiftly lied to him. Severus did not need mind-magic to know the false from truth; he knew enough of body language to be certain of that.

Many people were keeping a secret, and it was out of fear.

He stilled his hand, clutching the coin in his palm. He still didn't know what irked him the most – the fear or the secret? What could these children have done to inflict such fear into the hearts of men? Or was it who they worked for that made sure this secret was kept?

Severus shook his head tiredly. He felt like he could not escape the whirling mess of thoughts and theories in his head that were all connected some way or another to Potter, Granger and Weasley. He couldn't figure them out – he still didn't know why he wanted to – and he felt like he was slowly being driven mad by it.

He flipped the coin again, and sighed, before taking a sip of whiskey.

xXx

The coals in the oven glowed a deep red in the darkness of the night. Harry swung his legs over the side of the bed, and looked across at it.

He couldn't sleep, which was never really new, and his body awake. He shivered and thought of stealing the blanket away from Ron and Hermione, before thinking better of it after the last time Hermione had given him a black-eye because of similar past attempts.

He gripped the edge of the bed, the sheets bunching up between fingers, and gave out a deep breath. He looked over his shoulder when he heard rustling and then felt the sudden warmth of Hermione's small hand pressed against the skin of his back.

'Harry?' he heard her whisper.

'Hey,' Harry said softly. 'Go back to sleep, bitch-face.'

Amusement trickled down the bond, warming him enough to give rise to a small smile. 'Okay,' she said sleepily back, rolling over and away, 'But at least try to sleep, scar-head.'

Harry chuckled, pulling his legs into a cross-legged position. He listened to the even breathes of his bonded, counting them, following them. And then he heard something - a voice, so cold, chilling, almost breath-taking in its venom.

'Come . . . come to me . . . let me rip you . . . let me tear you . . . let me kill you . . .'

Harry had his wand out on the second word, had sprung off the bed and cast a Lumos spell. He slowly turned around in a circle, nerves alert and body ready like a tightly strung bow.

'Harry!' Hermione hissed from the bed. He gaze shot to her, almost feverishly, as he frantically took her in. She had her wand out, as had Ron. Alarm and worry soared through the bond as they stared at him.

'Did you hear it?' Harry demanded quickly, shaking slightly.

'Hear what?'

The dark-haired boy shook his head, eyes wide. 'The voice. Did you hear it?'

Hermione stared at Harry with a frown. She quickly watched the memories he sent her, and her frown deepened. 'Harry . . .' He knew her answer suddenly from the tone of her voice. They had not heard it.

A bitter smile crept onto his face. 'Great, now I'm hearing voices.'

xXx

I'm tired. Tired of the memories I never wanted in the first place. I'm tired of not sleeping, of being scared of the nightmares I know will come. I don't want these shaking hands of mine. I don't want to cry for no reason, for so many goddamn reasons. I don't want the memories of blood and pain, of hopelessness and despair. I want to be nothing.

Perhaps it would've been better to never have existed at all.

xXx

Author's Note: Sorry for the long wait, but real life has been a real bitch to me lately. But now that I'm sick, I have time to write – which is the only bonus of such a state, really. Oh yeah, in this chapter I added passages here and there from Chamber of Secrets, all of Lockhart. No one can make an idiot out of Lockhart quite like JK can, so I'm paying homage to her brilliance.

I've got a question for you guys reading this out there – who do you think is the person from the last paragraph? I'm interested, since I put in a few clues, so guess away!

Chapter 25 – Not Anymore

The soft chatter echoed slightly around the large room, emanating from the small groups of children milling about a circle of chairs. Leaning against a wall, on the far-side of the well-lit room, Harry stood with his bonded. He brushed back dark hair from his face, as he watched and listened. He followed the movements of lips, and concentrated on a conversation here and there. After a moment, he gave Ron and Hermione a side-long glance.

'Michael Corner isn't here,' he said quietly, neutrally.

'The one that cuts himself?' Ron asked as he chewed on the end of a toothpick thoughtfully. Even though he had been banned from smoking in the group therapy meetings, he'd be damned if he didn't have something in his mouth to play with, no matter the complaints he got.

'Yeah,' Hermione answered, frowning. 'Corner's friend, Goldstein, is very subdued. Something happened.'

Harry looked at her. 'Maybe Corner cut himself too deep.'

'Perhaps.'

They stood in silence, side by side, till the doors opened and Pomona Sprout walked in. She bustled over to the circle of chairs, merrily greeting students on her way, then finally took a seat. She clapped her hands together and called out her usual, 'Gather round!'

Slowly, the second years took their seats and brought their gazes on the short, cheery woman before them. When the chatter and welcomes died down, Sprout's face became sad and tired. 'I'm sorry to announce, so soon in the year, that our very own Michael Corner has left Hogwarts. He wounded himself very badly over the summer holidays and his parents decided it was time for him to get help.'

He is now in St. Mungo's Rehabilitation Centre, if you want to visit him.'

A long stretch of silence strained. Harry looked at each and every student's face, noting the different, soundless reactions. Some were of shock, others sadness. When he looked at Susan Bones, a Hufflepuff, she was shaking, her eyes wide and streams of tears fell down her cheeks. It wasn't unusual for the girl to be crying, since she did so often, but Harry found it strange to note the fear in her eyes. By her side, Zacharias Smith was staring at her worriedly, hesitantly. That too, was not unusual, but the intensity was . . .

A chair screeched as it was pushed back over stone. Anthony Goldstein stood, his face pale, his shaking fists clenched at his sides as he glared at Sprout with hate. 'You,' he started, his voice rising, 'You! I hate you!' His eyes were burning, brimming. 'You say you want to help us – but you don't care! You're 'sorry'?! You know what? I don't believe you! Michael tried to kill himself, goddamnit, to get away from people like you! You don't care one bit, but you act like you care to sooth your guilty conscience!'

Goldstein swung round and kicked the leg of his chair, making it skid across stone. Angry, frustrated tears escaped down his face. 'He's my friend . . . my only fucking friend and he's gone.' He curled into himself on the ground, hugging his knees, hitting them with fists feebly. 'I don't want any more lies . . . I don't care if it hurts - I want the truth, you bastards . . . they said he was fine . . . he said he was completely fine . . .'

Everyone stared down at him, as he sobbed.

xXx

Draco listened to the chime of the old clock as he swung his legs back and forth. He sat on one of the many dusty desks, which was part of the few that weren't covered by white cloth. He stared at the

old grandfather clock in the corner of the disused classroom he was in, noting that the hands lay on midnight. When the chimes faded away, he stilled his legs and listened to the quiet.

Hogwarts seemed to change after curfew. Gone was the hum of many voices and the sound of laughter echoing throughout the hallways, disappearing with the warm sunlight. The castle seemed to sleep like its inhabitants did at night. It had a kind of slumbering sentience that made Draco's skin prickle at times, and made him feel like he was being watched.

The boy stared down at the ground, past his limp legs and shiny leather shoes. He was tired, so very tired. Sleep eluded him nearly every night now, and left him to wander. He didn't want to dream about his father, as he sat at his desk with his wine – so very quiet with his empty eyes. He wanted to forget.

Draco lifted his arm and stared at his wrist. He felt a deep, gut-wrenching twist in his stomach and his wrists tingled almost painfully. He brought his fist down on the desk, ignoring the shooting pain.

Why couldn't he forget those pictures? If only he had not found them, had not opened his father's drawer and saw them. He wanted to forget those pictures of his mother's body, as it lay in a dirty gutter, vomit smeared across its mouth, with its wrists slit over and over again with a simple kitchen knife. There had been so much blood . . . if only . . .

If only.

xXx

The courtyard was bright with the light of the midday sun, and was filled with the sound of chattering leaves as a soft wind blew. Across the patches of grass between paved walkways, sat groups of

students dotted about talking, studying and mingling together. Under a tree, in a stream of dappled light, Harry never let his eyes stray as he reached over and slipped Ron's cigarette out of the redhead's hand. As he took in a long, deep drag, he watched silently.

'Zabini is going at Longbottom again,' Hermione murmured, her shoulder touching his own slightly.

'Nothing new there,' Ron retorted as he turned a page of his book. After a moment of silence, he looked up from his reading and stared too.

'It's barely been two months,' Hermione said and then frowned. It seemed that since Draco Malfoy had taken no interest in continuing his rivalry with the Boy-Who-Lived, the House of Slytherin had appointed another to take his place, to voice their hate for Neville Longbottom. And Blaise Zabini had taken to this new position with relish. Not a day had gone by without news of fights in the corridors, of the new insults and slanders Zabini had uttered and of the rumours of midnight duels running wild like a bush-fire. For the trio, who still watched Longbottom from a distance, they found it tedious, and most of all, unoriginal.

'Creedy is still not helping,' Ron added in airily, bringing his gaze back to his work once more. 'Not one bit.'

'Well, he makes it easy for Zabini. He adds so much delicious fuel to the flame,' Harry said, absently throwing the cigarette in the general direction of Ron. The freckled boy caught it within an inch of his current page and sent a withering glare at his dark-haired bonded, who ignored it graciously in return.

Ever since the beginning of the school year, Neville Longbottom had found a wide-eyed and enthusiastic fan in Colin Creedy. The first year followed him around the school, taking pictures of him with his muggle camera and took a huge delight in greeting Longbottom

every time he passed him, which was numerous times a day. The young boy spoke constantly about his hero and if the rumours were true, there was a huge poster of the Boy-Who-Lived above Creevy's bed.

But the true cause of Longbottom's irritation and misery was Gilderoy Lockhart. In class, Longbottom was forever being chosen to perform spells and being called back at the end of lessons. In the corridors, Lockhart would swagger over and put an arm across Longbottom's shoulders, then proceed to quote scenes from his books, in hopes to impress the boy even more. Hermione even found the incessant winking and 'dazzling' smiles sent Longbottom's way annoying, so she could imagine how angry the boy was.

As Hermione watched Longbottom shout an insult back at Zabini, she found she was surprised that the boy hadn't snapped yet. Sure, Longbottom retaliated, but there was sense that he was holding back even then. He hadn't snapped. If Longbottom was as strong as Hermione hoped he was, Zabini would be a bloody mess when that day came.

'Oh, yeah,' Ron said, breaking the silence that had fallen over them. 'I forgot to mention it, but we've got new orders.'

Both Harry and Hermione turned their heads to look at him. Ron closed his book and looked out over the courtyard. 'Durand's special friends miss you, Hermione,' he carried on conversationally, 'And Fere asked after you, Harry. He says you're the only one that can help.'

Hermione rolled her eye and mumbled under her breath, 'Special friends, eh? More like greedy bastards. . . '

'Does Fere want a reply back tonight?' Harry asked quietly, sitting up to pack his bag. He glanced at Ron briefly and when he saw the redhead's quick nod, he got up to his feet. His mouth curled upwards

into a small smile as he looked at Ron, then Hermione.

'Come on, guys, we've got a busy day ahead of us.'

Ron grinned as he crushed his cigarette underfoot. 'No rest for the wicked, right?'

'You could say that,' Hermione said amusedly as she watched Longbottom punch Zabini in the face.

xXx

The flaming torches along the passageway's wall flickered, and shadows danced across stone. Standing alone, a one-eyed girl furiously rubbed the wall with a cloth, biting back the string of swear words on the tip of her tongue. Her arm and hand blurred as she moved, the muscles in her pale arm straining as she reached higher, so more of the words beneath could disappear as she went. She didn't let herself concentrate on the words or their meanings. Getting angry without a vent was dangerous, for both her and Harry, especially when he became the victim of another one of their fist-fights.

They had left the yearly Halloween Feast early, and returned to their quarters, but failed to notice that they had been followed. Hermione swore in her head loudly, damning Hogwarts and all its inhabitants to hell more than once, for forcing her and her bonded to let their senses dull to such a degree. If Fere found out that mere school children had followed them across nearly half a castle without them knowing it . . . Hermione stilled and stopped herself from shivering at the thought.

She started to clean the wall again, but paused. Her traitorous gaze read the words splashed across the wall. Even after a year of being in Hogwarts, they still were not accepted. They may have not done anything to change that . . . but it was still petty. Why did their fellow

house-mates deem it just to ostracise them to this degree? To such an extent that they defile her property constantly, attack her bonded in corridors and brand the very walls of their school with lurid names and insults?

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek to stop from cursing out loud.

The bastards could've at least not charmed it to be resistant to cleaning spells . . .

A door creaked open and Hermione swung round to see Harry and Ron slip out of their rooms. They too held cloths in their hands. She gave them a tight smile, more as a greeting than anything else, and reined in her anger from the bond.

'Took you guys long enough,' she huffed, going back to her task at hand.

'It's not our fault that you have a weird way of packing things away,' Ron grumbled, a cigarette hanging out the corner of his mouth. 'How were we supposed to know it was that cupboard, and not the other one?'

The girl's mouth twitched up into a grin for a second before she scowled at the redhead. 'Idiot.'

A ginger eyebrow rose. 'Come on, you can do better than that.' Ron jerked a thumb at the wall they were cleaning. 'You can do way better than these morons.'

Harry chuckled behind a hand.

Ron looked at him irritably. 'What?'

The dark-haired boy shook his head, smiling, and said, 'That's such a Ron thing to say. So typical.'

Hermione grinned. 'Such a Ron compliment too.'

Ron glared at them, before looking up at the wall indignantly. 'Well, it certainly helped to break the mood. Mione was going into hell-cat mode, while you-' he poked Harry's side, ' – were becoming all morose and moody. That combination is never good.'

'True,' Harry said with amusement, as he inspected his work.

'You know, those bloody idiots are far too liberal with their adjectives,' Hermione muttered.

'They must've brought a dictionary with them . . .' Ron tilted his head the side, and crossed his arms. 'I don't know half of these fucking long words. And I've been living you for like ever.'

Hermione whipped her cloth out and hit Ron on the arm. 'Remember the last time you called me a 'walking dictionary'?' she asked dangerously.

' . . . rip . . . tear . . . kill . . . '

Harry froze, as he heard it – that voice! The coldness of it slipped over him like a glove, chilling him to the bone. He let go of the piece of cloth he had been holding and whipped out his wand, pressing himself against the wall.

'Harry?'

'Shut up!' he hissed, listening hard as he could.

' . . . so hungry . . . for so long . . . '

It was fainter than before. Was it moving? With that thought, Harry half-walked, half-ran down the passageway, nerves alert and

muscles ready. They slipped into the Entrance Hall, ran past the babble of the Feast and scaled the staircases to the first floor. Harry could hear it move, hear it whisper, as if it were close to his very ears.

' . . . kill . . time to kill . . . '

'Harry, what - '

'Shut the fuck up already!'

' . . . I smell blood . . . I smell BLOOD!'

Alarm shot through Harry, nearly halting him in his steps. He could feel his bonded's worry, but pushed it aside, and ran. He weaved through hallways, in darkness and light alike, only mildly aware of the soft footfalls of Ron and Hermione from behind. There had been so much intent in that voice – no mercy, no regret, just blood-lust. His whole body hummed with the need for self-preservation, but he pushed himself onwards on will alone.

Then they found it.

They were silent as they stared up at the words, painted across the wall in blood. The red slid down stone and dripped to the floor, shimmering in the light cast by flaming torches.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF
THE HEIR, BEWARE.

When the clattering of running feet sounded, Hermione tugged Ron and Harry back in the shadows, spelling them invisible and silent. They watched as Neville Longbottom, Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan stumbled and stopped before the message, their faces pale and set in confused fear.

'What's that thing – hanging underneath?' Finnigan asked, lifting a

shaking hand to point. Hanging from a torch bracket, above pools of water, was Argus Filch's cat, Mrs Norris. She was as still as a board, eyes wide and unblinking.

'Let's get out of here,' Thomas said quietly, fearfully, pulling on Longbottom's top.

'But shouldn't we try and help - ' Longbottom started awkwardly, unable to tear his eyes away.

'Trust me, we don't want to be found here.'

But then they heard it, the distant rumble of talk and feet. As Harry, Hermione and Ron slipped away into the coming crowd, they heard Blaise Zabini triumphantly shout out though the sudden quiet: 'Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!'

xXx

I don't think I feel sadness anymore. The emotion seems so foreign to me – even when they look at me with such pity, with such hurt. They want to help, but I do not take it. I don't need it. I don't need them. Humans only evoke emotions, be it positive or negative, in one another. They only serve to deter my purpose. No, I never needed them. They were only ever obstacles, though I didn't look at them that way. Emotions made that realisation too much to bear, so I refused it, but now that the darkness has ripped them away, bringing clarity, I can face it. I'm drowning, with as much air as I want around me, because of the choice I made.

You know what? It's sick how much I'm clinging to every moment of it.

xXx

Author's Note: Thank you for the wonderful reviews!! I really enjoyed

reading them and a few spurred me to write more of this story even though I'm far too busy at the moment . . . studying for exams and such things. Urgh.

Ha, so most people think it's Draco, eh? Interesting . . .

Chapter 26 – Blood Will Have Blood

They sat in row, three small smiles stretched across their faces. The soft crackling of the fire and the swift scratching of a quill were the only sounds to be heard. Over his glasses, Nathan Riley's eyes darted from his page to the children across from him again and again, his expression that of barely contained terror. Harry watched the man's hands shake, so much so he could hardly hold his quill. The dark-haired boy had to stop himself from grinning. After a few more moments of the man's pathetic show, Harry sat up in his seat, chuckling.

Riley's reaction was electric. His head jerked up, his body and hands stiff in fear. His eyes were wide, like that of a caged animal.

Harry gave the man an almost warm look. 'You tried to rat us out, didn't you?' he laughed. 'Like the spell we cast, sir? How's your poor heart beating? It's not like you can betray us anyway, with your life on the line.' The boy made a show of tapping his chin thoughtfully. 'And also that handy spell that makes you speak of everything other than our little secret.'

Slowly, the quill was shakily lowered to the tabletop. Riley's Adam's apple bobbed as he gulped. He opened his mouth a few times, his gaze flying from one child to the next, as if to test the ground. Or see how far he could go, if he garnered enough courage, that is. Harry watched him, slightly fascinated.

'C-can't you let me g-go?' he stuttered, in so soft a whisper that they strained to hear it. He glanced up at Harry, and when he saw the boy's smile widen a little, he looked away. 'I d-did what you a-asked of me. P-please. Please let me go.'

Harry heard a creak and looked over to his side, to see Hermione lounge back into her chair. Her head was tilted to the side, and while her half-smile was small, the mirth dancing in her eye was great.

'Now why would we do that, Mr Riley?' she asked sweetly. 'We're children. We like toys. Why would want to lose our favourite plaything?'

Hermione lazily got up out of her chair and Riley froze. She sauntered closer, then leaned across his desk and grinned. She poked his forehead with a finger, pushing his head back before it righted itself once more.

'Be a good little puppet now, and dance with our strings, yeah?'

White-faced, the man could do nothing but nod.

xXx

They left the Three Broomsticks and walked to the edge of the village to catch their waiting carriage back to Hogwarts. It had been the first time they had seen Nathan Riley, their 'psychologist', in the new school year. They had left the man to his own devices over the summer, too bothered and busy to deal with him. Though they were supposed to see him, they hadn't, and no doubt, due to the silence of one Severus Snape, Riley had been prompt in his false reports.

As the Thestral-driven carriage made its way up the winding, cobbled roads, the trio could plainly see that autumn was in the air. The trees, some still heavy with leaves, were splashes of deep colour against the grey skyline. The ground and roads were covered by leaves, a mirage of reds, oranges and yellows. It was like a heavy-handed painter had finished his work half-way, leaving the rest for winter to complete.

Harry looked down, away from the window, to stare at Hermione. His expression was neutral, unreadable.

'Why do you keep on calling him a toy?'

Hermione grinned and shrugged a shoulder. 'Dunno. It's fun getting him riled up and flustered, I guess.'

Harry looked away from her, frowning slightly. 'It seems . . . unnecessary.'

He glanced up at Hermione, both of them ignoring Ron's soft snort and amused mutters of 'riled up Riley', and stared at one another. Hermione sobered, serious.

'I don't mean anything by it. Just for entertainment's sake really,' she said, then a wicked grin flashed onto her face suddenly. 'Don't worry, Harry – he's a little too old for my tastes!'

Harry pulled a face. 'You weird, weird person. Please refrain from putting such mental images in my head, 'Mione.'

She grinned, her eye light. They sat in a companionable silence for a while, basking in the little warm light the sun gave. But as Harry was left to his own thoughts, he found they wandered, not unusually, to familiar places. In his mind's eye he saw flashes of the blood-written message across the wall. What did it all mean? Where was this 'Chamber of Secrets'? Where had he heard or read of such a place? It was like it was on the tip of his tongue – so very close . . .

He shook his head tiredly, when the feeling passed.

The school's grapevine spoke of nothing else. Speculations, rumours . . . but one could never know if what they heard was true there. Filch's cat, Mrs Norris, had been petrified – that much was certain. Even Dumbledore confirmed the trio's theories, publicly no less, so they were wary of trusting such information. The aged Headmaster could've said that to placate the masses.

That voice.

Harry stopped the shiver that threatened to run through his body. Why was he the only person to hear it? He couldn't get the coldness of the voice out his head . . . it was almost like the owner of it was inhuman. No, no human could have such mindless killing intent, of that he was certain. He thought back to the times he had heard it, to the time it had lead him to a scene of a crime. He, Ron and Hermione had been the first to find it, presumably, but why had Longbottom been the next? It made no sense – the Boy-Who-Lived had been merrily talking to his best friends in the Great Hall when they had left the Feast. Had they followed them? Harry shook his head – they would've known if they had been followed, his bonded, though alarmed when he had dashed off, had been thorough after the vandalism to their passageway wall. They could take no chances, and certainly not now.

'Harry?' a voice called, pulling Harry from his thoughts. He turned to look at Ron, who was frowning, an open Daily Prophet balanced across his legs. 'Mate, that constant curiosity of yours is like a bee buzzing next to my ear. Talk, now. Or I'll smack you.'

Harry grinned for a moment, tempted to send a wave of curiosity through the bond, but thought better of it when he saw that Ron was rolling up his newspaper threateningly. He looked up out of the window, his face cleared of expression.

'I was just wondering why Longbottom and his friends appeared right after us,' he murmured, frowning. 'It was like he got a warning of some kind.'

'They weren't following us, they came from a different route,' Ron added, taking a cigarette out his pocket.

Hermione absently flicked her wand and produced a tiny flame for the red-head at her side as she stared thoughtfully at the seat across from her. 'You think . . .' she paused, 'That voice you heard. Do you

think Longbottom heard it too?'

Harry bit his lip. 'Perhaps. But go on.'

'I listened around, and found out that Longbottom froze in the middle of supper, then ran out of the Hall. People thought at first that he had eaten something bad, but then . . .' She shrugged. 'I don't know. So much is left unknown here.'

'And the Chamber of Secrets? I feel like I have heard of it before . . .'

Hermione ran a hand through her short spikes thoughtfully, pushing them back and messing them up more than before. 'It was last year. When we were researching the Founders. I found a passage pertaining to it - to Salazar Slytherin's secret chamber he made before he left Hogwarts.'

'He left because of disagreements over blood, right?' Ron cut in. 'Didn't want to teach muggle-borns or something like that.'

Hermione nodded. 'It makes sense now, what Zabini shouted out.'

'Why?'

'Apparently, as the legend goes, only Slytherin's true heir can open the Chamber of Secrets and unleash the horror within, which will purge the school of those unworthy of studying magic. Such as 'mudbloods'. Such as people like myself.'

xXx

Before him, the wide hallway lay empty, the walls and floor covered by bright sunlight. There were no students about, as classes were in session. His footsteps resounded slightly, till he stopped before the door to a bathroom. He reached for the door-handle, but paused when he heard a noise. Someone was crying inside.

After a few moments of debating in his head, Harry opened the door and went inside. He immediately heard the person become silent in one of the stalls, sniffing softly, quietly choking on their tears. Harry waited, completely still, torn between the want to leave and his sudden interest. He recognised this person's magic.

Not entirely sure what he was doing, and why, Harry quietly spelled the stall door open. He watched it as it swung inwards, to bring Draco Malfoy into view. The blond boy froze, and stared at Harry. He did not move to rub his tears away, refusing to acknowledge them. A part of Harry concluded that the boy did not look attractive while crying, with his blotchy cheeks and red-rimmed eyes. Another wondered why he was crying.

His mother.

A feeling, like a deathly cold hand, gripped his heart. Harry said nothing, as he suddenly realised that, unlike the boy before him, the only memory he had of his mother was of her sobbing, pleading uselessly, desperately, before her body fell limp on the ground, her arms still tight around his body. This little boy, so reduced by Harry's actions, was mourning the loss of something he had, something he remembered and had taken for granted. He had never known the pain of never having.

'What? Aren't you going to humiliate me too?' Malfoy asked fiercely.

Harry's expression did not change. It held nothing, a tightly controlled nothing. 'No. I don't want anything to do with you.' He turned and left.

There was no sense of guilt. No regret or sadness. Only a deep satisfaction of a job well done. And a stillness he had never quite known.

xXx

Ron shifted uncomfortably under the crisp white sheets of the bed he was in. He glared at the expanse of the room, at the long rows of beds lining the walls and pulled his nose at the sharp smell of disinfectant that seemed to be everywhere. Night in the Hospital Wing was very cold and strange in its quiet. It was a realisation that Ron found he did not like, or had wanted to find out. He sent a withering glare at the ceiling.

Damn you, Hermione.

Annoying her, in his mind, did not equate to getting a broken arm. They had been arguing all day, all through the Quidditch match, and even when a rogue bludger had gone after Longbottom. Even though he had suggested that they have an authentic reason to be in Hospital Wing with Longbottom after Lockhart spelled his arm bones away, he hadn't thought she'd take him seriously. Or go quite so far. And gleefully while doing so at that.

He tenderly brushed his bandaged and splintered arm. He had refused the healing spells Pomfrey had offered, so he was running on pain-relieving potions and his body hummed with them. In the morning, he decided, he'd take up the offer. But now, he had to stay and watch over Longbottom, and that meant he had to have a plausible excuse to be in the same room as him.

Directly across from him, Longbottom lay asleep in his bed. Ron stared at the boy for a long moment, before he sighed and settled down in his bed, prepared for another sleepless night. Ron suppressed a flare of the bond, reacting instinctively, and made his magic levels barely noticeable with the ease of an age-old habit.

It wasn't long though he had to wait, till something happened.

Ron had to stop himself from grabbing his wand when he heard a pop. Before he closed his eyes, he glanced at Longbottom and saw

the shape of a creature hanging over him. As he pretended to be asleep, he realised that he recognised the creature – it was a house-elf.

A yelp of pain broke the silence of the night. There was a small shuffling – Longbottom was moving around in his bed, under his mess of sheets.

'Get off! Dobby!'

There was a sniffing. 'Neville Longbottom came back to school,' said a miserable voice. 'Dobby warned and warned Neville Longbottom. Ah, sir, why didn't you heed Dobby? Why didn't Neville Longbottom go back home when he missed the train?'

'What're you doing here? And how did you know I missed the train?'

There was a sudden guilty silence.

'It was you!' Longbottom hissed angrily. 'You stopped the barrier letting us through!'

'Indeed yes, sir. Dobby hid and watched for Neville Longbottom and sealed the gateway and Dobby had to iron his hands afterwards – but Dobby didn't care, sir, for he thought Neville Longbottom safe, and never did Dobby dream that Neville Longbottom would get to school another way! Dobby was so shocked when he heard Neville Longbottom was back at Hogwarts, he let his master's dinner burn! Such a flogging Dobby never had, sir . . .'

'You nearly got Seamus and me expelled,' Longbottom said fiercely. 'You'd better clear off before my bones come back, Dobby, or I might strangle you.'

'Dobby is used to death threats, sir. Dobby gets them five times a day at home. But sir, Neville Longbottom must go home! Dobby thought

his bludger would be enough to make -'

'Your bludger? What do you mean, your bludger? You made that bludger try and kill me?'

'Not kill you, sir, never kill you! Dobby wants to save Neville Longbottom's life! Better sent home, grievously injured, than remain here, sir! Dobby only wanted Neville Longbottom hurt enough to be sent home!'

'Oh, is that all? I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you wanted to send me home in pieces?'

'Ah, if Neville Longbottom only knew!' the house elf groaned pitifully. 'If he knew what he means to us, to the lowly, the enslaved, us dregs of the magical world! Dobby remembers how it was when He Who Must Not Be Named was at the height of his powers, sir! We house-elves were treated like vermin, sir! Of course, Dobby is still treated like that, sir. But mostly, sir, life has improved for my kind since you triumphed over He Who Must Not Be Named. Neville Longbottom survived, and the Dark Lord's power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Neville Longbottom shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the Dark days would never end, sir . . . And now, at Hogwarts, terrible things are to happen, are perhaps happening already, and Dobby cannot let Neville Longbottom stay here now that history is to repeat itself, now that the Chamber of Secrets is open once more - '

Suddenly, Ron heard something shatter and a splash of water as the house-elf broke a jug on his head. 'Bad Dobby, bad Dobby . . .' the creature said over and over under its breath.

'So there is a Chamber of Secrets? And – did you say it's been opened before? Tell me, Dobby!'

Ron opened his eyes when a deathly quiet abruptly took sway over

the Hospital Wing. Just as he moved to peered over at Longbottom, he heard a loud crack – and Dobby the house-elf disappeared. The sound of footsteps came closer, louder, till the door of the Wing burst open. Dumbledore and McGonagall walked in, still in their night-gowns. As far as Ron could see, they were carrying something, a statue of some kind. But as they heaved it up onto a bed, he saw its face – it was Colin Creevy.

There were some hushed whispers between the two of them, before Dumbledore reached out and took Creevy's ever-present camera out of his frozen hands. When they opened it, a jet of steam shot out and the smell of burnt plastic filled the air.

'What does this mean, Albus?' McGonagall asked.

'It means,' said Dumbledore said, 'that the Chamber of Secrets is indeed open again.'

xXx

The news of the attack on Colin Creevy was on everyone's lips, be it alive or dead, over the days after it had happened. Harry, Ron and Hermione noted that wherever they went, students walked in groups, muttering and talking quietly, fervently amongst themselves. Suddenly every person had a theory as to who the heir of Slytherin was. Even a few proclaimed it was the Boy-Who-Lived himself, as he was 'suspiciously' connected to both incidents – he had been the first person to find Mrs Norris, and Creevy had reportedly told another first year that he had left to bring some food to his hero.

But then an announcement was made – a Duelling Club was to be started. Suddenly, the fear was mixed with excitement.

After a few attempts at convincing Ron and Harry to go with her to it, for some laughs, she resorted to adamant threats of violence. When Ron nearly got a black-eye for calling her an impressive array of

insulting names, Hermione dragged her bonded down to the Great Hall after dinner. They had thought that Flitwick would be teaching them, due to fact he had been a duelling champion in his youth, but to everyone's dismay, excluding his fans, Gilderoy Lockhart stepped out onto the stage.

'Gather round, gather round! Can everyone hear me? Can you all see me? Excellent!' he coughed behind a hand to clear his throat, then flashed one of his dazzling, toothy smiles. 'Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little duelling club, to train you all up in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions - for full details, see my published works.'

Lockhart turned to his colleague coming up onto the platform. He gestured towards him with a wide smile, 'Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape. He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about duelling himself and had sportingly agreed to help with this endeavour.'

Behind him, Snape did not look pleased. At all. His upper lip was curling, his sneer set in place. Harry thought for moment how blind Lockhart must be to not see how disliked he was, especially by Hogwarts' resident Potion Master. He was barely tolerated, if nothing else.

Once Lockhart had suitably fooled himself when he tried to demonstrate the spells they were to be taught, Snape smoothly took over with a few choice insults and his near-permanent sneer. The greasy haired man called for everyone to pair off with another and have a go on the platform. When Longbottom edged towards Finnigan at his side, Snape sneered at them, 'Time to split up the dream team, I think. Finnigan, you can partner with Miss Bulstrode. Mr Zabini, come over here. Let's see what you make of the famous Longbottom.'

True to Snape's malevolence, the man made Zabini and Longbottom go first.

'Face your partner!' called Lockhart. 'And bow!'

The two boys gave each other reluctant, stiff nods.

'Wands at the ready! When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponent – only to disarm them – we don't want any accidents. One . . . two -'

Before Lockhart could even finish, Zabini and Longbottom had started - throwing spells at one another with a speed born from sheer determination and directed anger.

'Rictusempra!'

'Expelliarmus!'

'Tarantallegra!'

'Finite Incantatem!'

The Slytherin and Gryffindor swung back, eyeing one another warily through narrowed eyes, panting for breath. Lockhart was shouting something, but the two boys didn't look his way, intent on each other. The crowd below held its breath eagerly. Hermione found herself trying to stifle a yawn, and Ron elbowed her in the ribs to keep her from doing so.

'Serpensortia!' Zabini yelled out, and from his wand-tip a snake burst forth. It shot forward, a blur along the ground, straight for Longbottom.

It was too fast, too unexpected, and even before the trio, or Snape, could get their wands out – the snake was at him. Longbottom fell

over with a cry, clutching his leg, his face ashen. Long fangs pierced skin and sank into his calf, blood spurting from the wounds in arcs.

'Stop it! Let go!'

Time seemed to slow for Harry. He recognised the change in the way the boy had said those words. He knew the feeling – hair rising on the back of his neck, the faster heartbeat in his chest . . . He watched, in a daze, as the snake ripped out its fangs from Longbottom, as if it had been ordered to. No, it had been ordered to, and it had obeyed.

Just like the snake that never left Voldemort's side.

It all came crashing down on him – the voice, the one only he could hear – it all made sense. The ability to talk to snakes – Parseltongue. The one thing Voldemort had been renowned and feared for, as the last of the Slytherin line. And what Neville Longbottom could evidently do.

Parselmouth.

Harry understood then, as he stood frozen at the revelation. In his mind, flashes of the experiments done to him came in a sudden, bewildering rush – the injections, the screams, the unimaginable pain . . . But he knew now why he could hear what others could not.

He had the Dark Lord's blood in his veins.

And it sickened him.

He ran. Ran and pushed past people in the crowd. He ran through the corridors, heedless of the calls behind him, as fast as he could. He jumped down stairways, blindly turned corners, just running – running away from something he could not.

He hoarsely hissed the password to get into their quarters, not sure

how he got there, hitting the wall till it parted to reveal the door. He stumbled, took a few steps and then collapsed to knees. His whole badly shook nearly uncontrollably.

Blood . . . it's His blood . . .

His skin suddenly felt wrong, utterly wrong. He grabbed the skin of his arm, and twisted it sharply between his fingers – it felt wrong, not his, dirty. He wanted it gone, all gone, till there was no trace of it as if it had never existed at all. His hands moved, his nails dug in and tore, ripped and scratched. All he despised was in his very blood, in the blood that coursed through his heart and let him live – but it felt like poison, red hot poison.

Harry felt something grip his wrists. It stopped his task. He had to get rid of it, all of it. He struggled against that grip, kicked and screamed. But it was no use. No, nothing was. Even after all he had done, all the pain he had suffered and overcome, it still surmounted to nothing. He was still a thing, an object to be owned, that belonged to Him. He couldn't escape his blood.

He looked up, suddenly still, to see Hermione tightly holding his wrists, a little fear in her eye. He could feel the burning behind his eyes, the choking feeling in his throat and the sudden want of out.

'He made me into nothing, and everything I am,' he whispered, then wept.

xXx

I don't care anymore. I don't care how low the memories bring me, or how pathetic they make me. My shame has been eaten up. It's all gone . . . and I'm left desensitised with the gaping hole it leaves behind. But I don't care. I don't care . . . don't care . . .

xXx

Author's Note: This chapter was very difficult for me, on many levels. It took me days to write it, so I hope you like it.

The conversation between Neville and Dobby are from the book, except for the names, obviously. And bits here and there of dialogue of side characters, like Lockhart, are straight from the book. Disclaimer done, over and out.

Chapter 27 – To Be Owned

The building rose up before him, grey and unfeeling. The man stood at the gateway, his dark eyes watching a group of children playing with a ball beyond a wire fence in a concrete layered quad. He took in their flushed and smiling faces as they darted around, laughing and shouting at one another. He looked down, not giving into the urge to sigh.

He did not know why it was so hard to take a step.

Severus was a private person, and a part of him still expected others to respect that. But very quickly, and painfully, he had learned that it would never be so. A few certain Gryffindors had made sure of that. As he stood there, he tried to reason out his reluctance to take that crucial step. It was here he would find out what he needed, no, had to know.

But a part of Severus still didn't like this utter breach in privacy.

This was different from reading their medical files or asking around for information about them. This was a place where they had lived. Severus let his hands curl into fists in his jacket pockets. It was making him mad, this secret – their secret. It had been far too long since he had thought of anything besides Potter, Granger and Weasley. Far, far too long.

But the desire to know, the sheer unyielding force of it within him, was like a poison.

It burned through veins, tainting his thoughts and very actions. He even dreamed now of breaking through Potter's mind shields and finding out all that he hid behind those green eyes – behind Lily's eyes. He shook his head. And took a step forward. He didn't stop, didn't think as he went forward, his eyes locked onto the sign next to the door of the building that said 'Wooley's Orphanage.'

He knocked on the door, and within moments, he was let in by a tired looking woman. She wore round spectacles, her greying hair pulled back into a loose bun. As Severus pulled off his jacket for her to take, he sensed no magic in her. She was a muggle, to his surprise. He had known that some of the orphaned Experimental Victims had been put into muggle institutions, due to the over-flooded state of the magical ones, but to actually feel the lack of magic of the place made him want to shiver. At least he had had his mother at home in his youth, however brief that had been.

'And what can I do for you, Mr . . . ?' she asked after she had ushered him into her small, cluttered office.

'Severus Snape,' he answered, his voice slightly cold. 'Are you Miss Margaret Smith?'

The woman nodded. 'Are you here to adopt?'

Severus shook his head, noting the resigned look she wore in return. After a dull exchange of pleasantries and an offer of tea, to which he declined, Smith looked over her spectacles at him tiredly.

'So how can I help you, Mr Snape?' she asked, setting a pile of papers to the side.

'I'm here to find out about a child in your care,' he said carefully, watching her closely. 'A child of a friend of mine.'

Smith looked up at him. 'Name?'

'Hermione Granger.'

The muggle's eyes immediately became guarded. She slowly clasped her hands together on her desk. For a long moment, they stared at one another. Then Smith sighed. 'And what do you want to

know?'

'Is the child here?' he asked lightly.

Smith lowered her eyes, looking over to the side. Her mouth had pulled back into a sort of grimace, making her look much older than before. 'No,' she murmured. 'I'm assuming that you people haven't found her yet, have you?'

Severus straightened slightly, frowning. 'Found her?'

'She ran away. A few months after she came here. Nearly six years ago.' Smith folded her arms and leant back into her chair. 'But I can't help being relieved that she hasn't been found, after what she did.'

'What did she do?' he asked quickly, then admonished himself for the lapse in composure. But it was too late, it had happened, but he still needed to know.

Smith frowned at him. 'I told you people what had happened. On the phone and in a letter. But you did nothing about it.'

'I see,' he said after a moment of silence. 'And I apologise on my ministry's behalf. As you know, that time was very hard on us all. Our resources were stretched thin then. Your plea must have gotten lost amongst the many, many others.'

Smith eyed him warily. 'I know the little they told me about the war.' She looked at him sternly. 'And I want to make this very clear – if you find Hermione Granger, I don't want her back here. Take her to some other place.' There was a flash of anger in her eyes. 'I have other magical children here, but Granger was different. Different in a way I did not like.'

'What did she do?' he asked quietly. 'Surely, being so young at the time - '

'She nearly killed a child, just because he stole some food from her,' she said, cutting him off with a cold voice. 'She used magic to slam him against a wall, over and over again. And when I got there, his body was a mess beneath her bloody fists.'

Severus stared at her, unable to form words.

'She ran away then, before we could catch her and take action.' The woman smiled, a bitter and nasty little smile. 'Find out what you wanted to know, Mr Snape?' she asked sweetly.

xXx

Hermione gently dabbed a cloth on his skin, letting the material soak up the blood. She checked the wounds, some of them oozed and cracked, others knitting together slowly. None of them would become infected, but as she stared at Harry's arm, she knew that the scars would stay. They wouldn't be clean or small. And that was the price, she knew, of not seeking medical help. She bandaged up his arm again, and then sat back to look up at him.

He wasn't looking at her. His empty green eyes were on his arm, where he had ripped and torn with his nails not long ago, sickened by the fact that he had the Dark Lord's blood in his veins. Hermione fought to keep emotion from her face. She tentatively reached out through the bond to Harry, but only found a deep quiet within him. A stillness that did not allow for anything but itself.

She stifled the urge to sigh, and glanced over at the hearth to see Ron poke at the fire. His face was unreadable, but his body language spoke of thoughtfulness. And through the bond, he hummed with worry. She couldn't help but join him there.

'Harry,' she whispered, 'Look at me.'

She waited and waited, and nearly gave up, just before Harry looked up at her. Hermione forced herself not to flinch under his empty stare. It was unnerving to feel nothing from him. It felt like someone had cut off one of her limbs.

'Talk to us,' she urged, almost pleaded. She wanted to slap him out of this, out of whatever he was in, but she knew that violence would do no good in a situation like this. She could feel Ron watching them.

'You can't let Him defeat you like this,' she whispered, trembling slightly. She moved as if to reach out and touch him, but faltered when his eyes moved away from her own. 'Please, Harry. Don't do this to yourself - to us.'

Hermione nearly started when she felt a flicker of emotion from him. It was anger, yes, but it was something.

'You have no idea . . . of what it is like,' Harry said quietly, 'to know that even if we defeat Him, He'll be alive in my blood.'

'I don't care about blood,' Hermione hissed. 'It's the person we're trying to kill - the monster that we're going to destroy. Not blood. Blood doesn't make a person do the things He did. It's a substance that keeps people alive, nothing more.'

Harry looked at her, his eyes wide. There was a fierce sense of vulnerability to his expression that Hermione did not like or appreciate. 'Mione, I feel like He's here, under my skin,' he said brokenly, 'All the time. Everywhere.' He curled into himself, his bandaged arm pressed tight against his chest. 'Can't escape . . . I can't, I can't escape this.'

'You can't, and never will,' Hermione said harshly. 'You have Voldemort's blood in you. So what? It's just blood. It's yours now, will always be yours. And you're going to use it against Him.' Her face twisted, filled with anger. 'Where's your rage? Where's your strength

and courage? Where is your thirst for revenge, Harry?

His gaze fell to the floor. 'I don't know.'

She stood up and slapped him hard.

She could feel and see his shock, his sudden sense of betrayal and pain. But she didn't care. She was too angry. They had no time to be this weak. 'You know what, Harry? You're a fucking coward!'

She didn't see the punch, but she certainly felt it. She fell to the floor, then rolled away and got up to her feet again. She grinned as she wiped the blood away from her mouth. The bond was overcome with a furious rage, and she revelled in it.

'Don't ever call me that,' Harry said in a low and dangerous voice.

'I'll call you what I like,' Hermione countered, 'whenever I like.' She took a step forward. 'You're a coward, Harry, if you don't face up to this. You were raped by Voldemort and injected with his blood. So what? It happened. You can't change it. I was forced to eat my parents' flesh – and I can't change that!'

'I don't care about the past! Right now, He's in me – in my very blood!' Harry shouted back. 'He owns me, Hermione! He branded my skin and tainted my blood! I'm not anything, besides what he made of me!'

Hermione took another step and gripped the side of his neck with a hand, hard enough to bruise. 'Don't you dare think like that. He doesn't own you, you fool. No-one can own you, unless you let them! You're Harry, just Harry. Not Voldemort's.' She shook her head furiously, her eye blazing. 'You're the boy who will watch Him die with us. You're the boy who will kill him with us. Never forget that.'

'I am not just Harry,' he said tightly. 'I am owned.'

Hermione's hands jerked into fists at her sides. 'If you have to be owned – then you are ours.'

Neither of them knew who hit first. They fell into one another with all the anger and rage they felt – punching, kicking, scratching, shouting, screaming. Hermione wanted to hurt him, to make him see reason. She felt blood on her skin, but didn't know whose it was. She thought of nothing but the next move, the next action that would cause pain. She knew she was shouting at Harry, a nonsensical babble of insults and curses, for her throat was hoarse. The roar of her thundering blood sounded in her ears, making everything else seem like background noise.

When the last punch fell and hit her, she sagged to the ground on her knees. Harry soon followed her, collapsing in front of her. He was a mess, and the wounds on his arm had opened up again, bleeding through the bandages. She looked at him, and saw the tears fall from his eyes. Hermione felt a wetness on her cheeks, then nearly started when realised that she was crying too. She watched the tears fall down his bruised face, as they dangled off his chin and then finally landed in his lap.

She smiled, feeling the almost hysterical laughter rising up in her chest that wanted to get out. And when Harry smiled back at her, she grabbed him into a hug and laughed into his shoulder and neck. Together, they laughed and laughed and laughed, till their cheeks hurt and they had to gasp for breath. She held him tight, never wanting to let go. She wanted to always feel overwhelmed by Harry's emotions, even if they hurt her. She wanted him to feel, as much as she knew he could.

'Never forget, all right?' she said breathlessly into his ear. 'Never forget.'

He leaned back, pulling out of her embrace and looked at her solemnly. 'I'll try. I can't promise otherwise,' he said seriously.

Hermione glared at him for a moment, their gazes locked onto one another's, but then she relented. She couldn't ask for anything more, for he couldn't give her more.

She reached out and cupped his face with a hand. Without a smile, she said, 'Okay.'

xXx

Draco Malfoy did not understand it.

He couldn't stop thinking about them – about him. Ever since Potter had found him in the bathrooms, Draco couldn't get him out of his head. He didn't understand it. He found himself watching them, as they walked through the hallways and dungeon passageways, as they worked in classes in their quiet, efficient way. And in his watching, he noticed things he never did before. Like the fact that they sat at the very end of the Slytherin table as if they were banished, or like that they barely talked to one another, but it still seemed as if they knew what was going on in each other's heads.

But the one thing that scared Draco the most, was that he wanted to know more.

He wanted to know why they ignored him, when no-one else did. He wanted to know why they wanted to have nothing to do with him. They gave him nothing. No pity, no mocking words, no threats. They acted as if he didn't exist. Draco forced down the urge to punch something. He hated being ignored . . . being ignored was worse than the pity and ridicule. He wanted to be recognised by them, by him.

And Draco Malfoy always got what he wanted.

xXx

Please . . . someone save me from myself. I don't know what to do anymore. I don't want this. I can't. I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry. I can't, I can't . . .

xXx

Author's Note: Sorry for the shortness of the chapter, but I hope you enjoyed it nevertheless. My exams, or finals as some of you call them, are over finally. Holidays, here I come! :)

Chapter 28 - Reality

He stood there, in the shadow of a pillar, as he waited and listened all the while. He could hear footsteps, the murmurings of voices and soft laughter from down the hallway. As the voices became louder, and thus clearer, he recognised them. The boy glanced up and down the hallway as much as he could without being seen, shoving his uncertainties aside. He had no time for doubts. He would do what he had come to do.

'Oh, darn. Susan, I forgot my assignment in the Common Room,' he heard Zacharias Smith say, his tone overly apologetic. 'I have to go fetch it – or Flitwick will make me clean the feathers off his ceiling again. I'll meet you in the Library, okay?'

There was a silence, then a small, 'Yeah, okay.'

The boy pressed himself up against the pillar. With wide eyes, he listened to the clattering Smith made as he ran back up the hallway, till he disappeared. He stood still, as he heard the first soft footfall, then another, till he saw Susan Bones walk past. He watched her, with her small back to him, her hand clutching at her satchel tightly.

He stared at that tiny hand for a moment. Knuckles white, tendons quivering, fingers trembling. So pale, it seemed bloodless.

He matched her footsteps, sound for sound, following her. But when the shadows grew small and thin, he stepped out of them and grabbed her hand. She started violently, and only the boy's hand covering her mouth stopped the scream that nigh came out. He pushed her up against the wall, his grip of her hand unkind.

'Are you an Experimental Victim?' the boy hissed in question. Susan Bones stared at him, her eyes wide and almost blank with fear. Tears crept out of the corners of her eyes. He tightened his grip painfully when she did not respond. 'You're an Experimental Victim, right?'

Right?'

The girl nodded against his hand.

'Tell me everything you know about Harry Potter,' the boy demanded, his eyes flashing. He eased off his hand from her mouth, only to grip her other arm. She shook her head from side to side, a frown of confusion and fright on her face.

'Tell me! I know you go those group meetings.'

'I-I don't -' she drew in a choked breath, cutting off a sob. 'I d-don't know a-anything!'

'You take me for a fool?' he demanded in a low, cold voice.

'T-Truly, I don't k-know! T-They say n-n-nothing!'

With a snort of disgust, he let her go and watched as she collapsed on the floor. 'Useless,' he muttered under his breath as he walked away from her. 'Utterly useless.'

But for a time after, the sounds of her sobs would echo in Draco's mind, creeping into his thoughts, taking any chance of sleep he had left away with it.

xXx

Across the desk, rolls upon rolls of parchment lay unravelled. Dark eyes flickered from text to the next, under a deep frown. With a frustrated sigh, Severus Snape rose up out of his chair, throwing a parchment onto the many others that lay there haphazardly. He stalked to his fireplace and stared into the flames pensively.

The reports from the psychologist, one Nathan Riley, yielded nothing. Absolutely nothing. There was no mention of the wounds that

Severus had seen on Potter, Granger and Weasley – no mention of how they got them, whether they may be self-inflicted or brought upon them, or anything of the sort. It was like a void.

Either the man was incredibly oblivious, or being lied to.

Severus felt certain that is was the latter.

But what is the truth, and what is false?

xXx

They overheard the news of the next attack over breakfast. All around them, words were filled with fear and dread, spoken in hushed voices. It seemed that Neville Longbottom had yet again found the victims, but this time they were the Gryffindor ghost and his best friend, Dean Thomas. The Boy-Who-Lived didn't come down to the Hall, and Seamus Finnigan sat alone at the table, not touching his food with his usual enthusiasm for once. Over his head, a storm-cloud of worry and fear brooded. The boy did little to hide it.

'Let's go back to our rooms,' Hermione said, as she watched Ron eat his last bite. 'We don't have a class till second period.'

Ron laid his knife and fork down on his plate, then let his eyes flicker up to Hermione. He nodded once, before glancing up to the side, to Harry. The dark-haired boy's shoulders tensed when he felt Ron brush up against him through the bond, touching his emotions tentatively. Harry nodded, without looking at them, withdrawing from their bond till his presence was but a shadow of what it was before. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw him clutch at his arm, where underneath his sleeve lay the bandages and the self-inflicted wounds.

Hermione stifled a sigh and stood up, leading the way down to the dungeons.

Once inside their quarters, she closed the door behind Ron, and let her hand rest upon it for a while. For a moment, as she let her eyes fall shut, she had the mad wish that everything would go back to that day before she and her parents had been taken. She wanted to go back to a time when the scars did not exist, were incomprehensible even. To a time when smiles were priority and books were so wonderfully new and exciting. Her wish: the horrors she had witnessed and experienced . . . all gone, like a breath of wind.

But she knew that would never happen.

This is reality, she thought bitterly, harshly, letting her hand fall to her side.

'Hermione?'

She looked over her shoulder, then turned around. Ron had taken a spot by the fire, a cigarette already lit and smoking in his hand. On the couch, Harry sat quietly, his hands in his lap. She watched him for a moment, noting his hunched shoulders, the way he trembled ever so slightly and how his distant eyes stared at nothing. Suddenly, she was angry with herself. She had no time for such pathetic things as wishes, especially ones that could never be. She had to be strong – stronger than ever before.

For when Harry fell, she would pick him up.

She would remind him over and over again - with words, feelings, hurts – that he wasn't alone anymore. That he had a duty, a revenge to fulfil. That if he didn't stand up again himself, she'd drag him all the way. That she'd punch him back into shape, if need be. She would make him remember that.

She would make him remember that very clearly.

xXx

'The Chamber of Secrets . . .' he heard Ron murmur. 'We can't let this go on. If any more students are attacked, Hogwarts will be closed.'

'But what does it all mean? How are we to stop it if we don't know what we're up against?' Hermione interjected, taking a seat in one of the armchairs. She ran a hand through her hair, then let it rest against her nape, a frown on her face.

'I am not suggesting that we rush into this –that'd be more than just a mere folly,' Ron said, as he stared into the flames thoughtfully. 'But that we find a solution, and find one soon, at that.'

Harry let his gaze fall to his hands when a silence descended. He didn't want to speak. He didn't want to think either really. All he wanted was to curl up into himself, legs up to his chest, arms tight, his forehead on his knees, so close, so safe – and to drift off into a dreamless sleep for once. But the constant ache of his arm reminded him of things he'd rather forget.

He didn't want to face it, he didn't want to try.

What he felt couldn't be classified as nothing, but more as a disconnection from feeling. He knew it was all there – the despair, the rage, the hate – all just within reach. But he couldn't reach out to them. He wasn't sure if he wanted to.

'Then let's figure this out,' Hermione said decisively, breaking the silence. 'We know that Salazar Slytherin's heir has opened the Chamber of Secrets.'

'And we also know that the Chamber has been opened once before,' Ron added. 'But to what result, I do not know . . . the records I found are very unclear on the matter.'

She nodded. 'So two students, a ghost and an animal have been petrified thus far, by the horror of the Chamber . . .' Hermione said quietly, almost to herself. 'But what manner of creature is it?'

Ron opened his mouth as if to speak, but then stilled, his blue eyes flickering to Harry. His look turned calculating when Harry just stared back at him. 'What if . . .' Ron paused, then carried on, 'What if this is all connected to the voice Harry heard? We know now that Longbottom is a parselmouth, and perhaps that is why he knew where to go and where to look for the victims.' Ron gave Harry a pointed look. 'Perhaps the reason both you and Longbottom were the only ones to hear the voice of the monster before it struck was because it was snake of some kind.'

'The emblem of Slytherin's House is a snake . . . how very fitting,' Hermione sneered, before becoming serious once more. 'But the actions of this monster roaming the school contradict the legend of the Chamber of Secrets. It is supposed to kill those unworthy blood, not petrify them.'

'But let's go on the premise that it is meant to kill its victims. I thought it strange, that in every scene of the crime, there were reflective surfaces or something the victims could look through. Think about it . . . Filch's cat had the flooded hallway. Colin Creevy's camera had melted on the inside and when they carried him into the Hospital Wing, it was stuck in front of his face in his petrified hands. '

'But what about Dean Thomas?'

'The ghost. He was looking through the ghost,' Ron answered. 'And a ghost can't die twice.'

'Still, I . . .' Hermione trailed off, then froze suddenly. Her face went blank, and for a brief instant, Harry had the urge to reach out to her through the bond. But the feeling passed, like a breath of air, and the boy shied away from the bond. He knew what he should do – but for

once in his life, he didn't want to hurt. He wanted to feel nothing for a little while. Even if it didn't last. Even if the painful longing for apathy came again and went unfulfilled.

Just for a little while.

'Hermione?' Ron asked, a hint of worry in his voice.

She blinked, then her eye widened. Harry watched her, as the shock and dread leaked into her expression.

'It's a basilisk,' she whispered. 'A fucking basilisk.'

'No . . .' Ron shook his head. 'No, they're extinct. There can't be one at Hogwarts. No way. There can't.'

'It all makes sense – it all fits, Ron! Think about it,' she hissed, and though she tried to hide it, Harry saw her slight trembling.

'But how can we defeat a monster whose very eyes could kill us?' Ron asked. 'One look into its eyes means death.'

'I don't know, Ron,' Hermione bit out angrily. 'I don't fucking know, so don't demand it of me.'

Ron pursed his lips and his mouth became a thin line. A strange silence fell upon them, radiating with frustration, anger and fear. Harry glanced between his bondmates, then let his gaze fall down to his lap. He had just realised something, and it was not the kind of information that he alone could keep.

'We know of three parselmouths,' Harry said quietly, not looking up. 'Myself, Longbottom and Voldemort. Since our observations of Longbottom have revealed that he wasn't anywhere near the attacks when they happened – it is clear that we're dealing with a Horcrux.'

The weight of their eyes were on him, and suddenly, it felt far too much to bear. He forced himself to not react – to not hide within himself. He could feel their relief palpably, but when they both stretched out their emotions and encouragements to him, he flinched away till their feelings were as unintelligible as distant shouts.

Yes, he knew what he had to do, but that didn't mean he had to think about it. He would just do it, and carry on. Go on and on, till it all ended.

Maybe feeling nothing would make the journey easier.

xXx

'He's in the second corridor to the right,' Hermione whispered, rolling up the map she had in her hands. She tucked it away in her inner cloak pocket, her eyes narrowed and wary. Around her wrist, a thin blue line of magic snapped off the paper and rolled itself about her skin. Both Ron and Harry gave her curt nods, then they set off down the hallway one behind the other.

'Do you think this is wise?' Hermione tried again, glancing over her shoulder.

'What he is going to do is unwise,' Harry said clinically.

They stopped at the corner and peered around, only to see the hallway floor covered in large puddles of water. And standing at the very end of the hallway, with his back to them, was a boy. Slowly, they edged around the puddles, but as they came closer, Hermione started at a ghostly wail that shuddered and echoed through the hallway, and she jumped back into water.

The splash made the boy spin round to face them.

For a moment, they all stared at one another. Then Longbottom's

expression became furious. 'What do you want?' he spat out. 'Going to whisper behind my back, or try curse me like you Slytherins do? Or are you going to call me the Heir to your God forsaken house? Huh, huh?' He took a step towards them, shaking his head. 'You know what? I'm not taking this anymore – not taking the shit you people spurt out!'

Harry felt the sudden rise of Hermione's disdain at the display of childishness they had been presented, and he touched her on the arm lightly to stop the train of insults she had ready on her tongue. He felt, rather than saw, the glare she sent his way.

When they said nothing in reply, Longbottom stormed away, making much noise and splashes as he went.

They watched him, till he was out of sight. When he was gone, Harry turned around and looked up at the wall Longbottom had stood before. His expression did not change as he read the new message left in blood:

Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.

'Longbottom was going to do something very foolish,' Harry said without much feeling. He looked over his shoulder at his bondmates and gestured at the wall. 'This has gone far enough.'

xXx

Author's Note: Okay, firstly, I am sorry for the incredibly long delay. All I can say is that life has been a bitch to me in these past few months – big time. But lately, it's been getting better :) I had my birthday last week - and I was wondering . . . how old do you guys think I really am?

Anyway, hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Chapter 29 – The Chamber of Secrets

Harry stood in the middle of the flooded hallway, his footsteps leaving ripples behind in his wake. He silently stared up at the messages written in blood on the wall as the flickering golden light of the torches danced along his skin. After a moment, he looked over his shoulder at his bonded. Both Ron and Hermione were half in shadow, their hoods pulled forward, watching and waiting.

'Get rid of it,' Harry said, giving a small gesture towards the wall before him. 'We cannot be followed.'

Their eyes flickered away from him to the wall. With a tight slash of her wand, Hermione whispered a spell. The blood burst into flame, blackening, till it all fell to the ground in ash. With another spell, the scorch mark and ash disappeared, as if they had never been there before. The barest trace of magic was left behind, and Harry could already feel it fading.

'I can hear it,' the dark-haired boy murmured. 'It's moving.'

'Are you sure the entrance is here?' Hermione asked quietly.

'Longbottom was sure enough that it was,' Ron said as he took a step forward. 'But surface thoughts can be deceiving. Or he could just be wrong. If I had had more time to read his mind . . .'

'But you didn't,' Harry cut in, his tone flat, almost empty, as he stared up at the wall. 'Let's go.'

Ron's face darkened, then his lips parted as if to speak. But Harry turned to him, expressionless, and looked at him for a moment. The words fled Ron and he shut his mouth. He knew that Harry had felt what he was feeling, felt it quicker than a thought, and found he was not impressed by what was there. Fear, trepidation and uncertainty, all present, running through him like hot liquid fire.

One look and we're dead, Ron thought again and again, his anger rising. Don't you dare look down on me for fearing – for fearing failure, most of all. You may want death, you bastard, but if you die, we die too. Don't you dare look down on me – you have no right.

He jutted out his jaw and sneered at Harry. Standing between them, Hermione glanced from one to the other, not saying a word. Harry gave him a slow, disdainful once-over, going up and down, as he felt the edges of the meaning behind his bonded's thoughts.

In that moment, Ron very nearly hated the existence of the bond – it had it pros, but it had it cons as well. No matter what face Ron put on, they would know it wasn't real – they'd know his weaknesses. All of his weaknesses. In his anger, he didn't allow logical thought to point out that the bond had given him the surest form of trust there was. He didn't want to reason things out – he wanted Harry to stop blocking them out, to stop feeling nothing and everything at the same, all alone. Didn't Harry understand that it was easier to share the hurt together? Ron felt it wasn't fair – even when he had wanted to hide away from everything when he pushed his family out of his life, he had shared it with them, had talked to them, had felt it with them.

'Stop it,' Ron spat out, scowling, his hands bunching up into fists at his side.

'No, we have no time for this,' Harry said, his eyes narrowing. 'There cannot be a murder at Hogwarts or the school will surely be shut down.'

'No, you will stop right now,' Ron hissed. He knew his mask was slipping, but grabbing at it was like trying to hold sand in his hands. 'You really think that we will be able to destroy a basilisk by you shoving us out like we're strangers?'

'This is not the time and place, Ron. Listen to yourself.'

'I am! And I want you to listen too. For once, bloody well listen, you stubborn fool! We know you're hurt, but for God's sake, we are fucking hurting too. So get your head out of your arse and smell the roses, Harry – the fact is you've got to be stronger than this. I know you're stronger than this. I will wait in silence no longer. And I won't have you looking down on me like I'm some half-breed. You got that, mate? You fucking got that?'

Harry stared at him in silence, his expression unchanged. Then his head dropped forward slightly, and his face twisted. A burst of something akin to feeling came and went, nearly making both Ron and Hermione start. Ron took a step forward, his hand stretched out for Harry to take. But he didn't, instead he shook his head.

'Not now. There is no time,' Harry said curtly. He looked up at them. 'But I promise that I, no, we will deal with this afterwards. That's all I can give.'

Ron opened his mouth to argue, but Hermione placed a hand on his arm. Just then, the bond opened so very slightly, allowing for the barest touch of feeling through. Ron let a smile form on his face then, just because he wanted to and because he could. And to all of them, it felt like they had smelled a waft of home, lingering near.

xXx

Leaning forward, two fingers pressed against a tap, he peered down at a small engraving. It was of a snake, curled about itself, fangs bared. Harry brought his mouth close and gave a low hiss, 'Open.'

A loud clanking sound grated through the air, like great gears moving against one another. The circular sink of the bathroom began to move, then lowered down to floor. It opened up, revealing a pipe beneath, so deep that it was not possible to see the bottom. But it

was wide enough for man to slide into.

'We have no choice but to leave it open,' Ron said after a moment, almost reluctantly.

Hermione shot a look at him that was scathing. She whipped out her wand and spelled light to its tip with a Lumos. 'I'll go first,' she said briskly, making her way over.

'Hermione-'

'Ladies first, remember, boys?'

Ron frowned at her, then backed down. She cast a Cushioning Charm on herself, and climbed into the pipe. Ron soon followed her, then Harry. At the bottom, in a deep darkness of huge and moving shadows their lights created, they landed in a tunnel on a floor of bones. Ron crouched down to inspect, the bone cracking under his boots.

'Looks like they're rat bones,' he murmured, sending his bonded side-long glances. 'Must be what it feed itself on.'

A sudden burst of alarm erupted through the bond from Hermione, making Harry and Ron whip around, wands ready and held tight. Right before her, a small way down the tunnel, there was an outline of something huge and curved. It filled their entire path, but as the seconds lurched and slowed and passed, it didn't move. Harry raised his wand high and its light illuminated it.

'A snakeskin,' Hermione breathed out. She took a step forward hesitantly, then slowly followed the entire length of it. When she fell back to their side, she remarked in a quiet voice, 'All I can say is that this thing is bigger than huge.'

'Fuck,' Ron whispered, touching the skin with a shaking hand. His

eyes followed its length with something akin to awe. 'Must've been a shit load of rats.'

Hermione couldn't stop the smile that twitched onto her face at Ron's weak attempt at humour. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Harry couldn't help himself either, with the little fire that sparked in his eyes.

Just as Hermione made to go down the tunnel, Harry held up a hand to stop her, a finger pressed to his lips. They stood side by side, listening keenly, and slowly the sounds all around them became louder, clearer. The drip-drip of water from the arched ceiling, the sound of scuttling rat-feet, their small breaths escaping into the air and . . . a thud?

Harry immediately, without looking at them, made a slashing movement across his throat with two fingers. They doused their lights without so much as a flicker or a choke. All three of them pulled their hoods forward and slipped into a stance that had them both steady and alert. The sound was louder now, as if someone was sliding down the pipe they had gone down, thudding slightly against the turns.

Hermione's breath hitched as the blue string of magic pulsed about her wrist. There was a crunch of bones as someone landed. She crouched down low and non-verbally cast three successive stunning spells, all a small distance from each other. The one on the right hit something, while the others dissipated against the tunnel walls in bursts of red light.

Ron called forth another Lumos and they approached warily in its light. And there, on the tiny white bones, lay Neville Longbottom.

'Great, you knocked out Boy Wonder,' Ron said dryly. 'Now we have to deal with him.'

'We would've had to deal with him anyway,' Hermione shot back in annoyance. She glared at Ron, waving a dismissive hand towards the unconscious Longbottom. 'He would've gotten killed wandering about around here.'

'So can we,' Ron bit out.

Hermione's glare transformed into a dark scowl. 'We've done a lot of things, Ron. And there have always been high chances that we could be killed while doing them. So please, tell me why this time is different? And while you doing so, why don't you tell me why you're being a pathetic, blundering idiot who doesn't think before he speaks?'

'Oh, yeah? What about you – waving your wand about before you bloody well actually see who you're knocking out? Why don't you think either before you go all trigger-happy?'

'You bastard, you're so asking for-'

'Shut up,' Harry said abruptly, harshly. 'Both of you.'

Without another word, Harry made his way down the tunnel. After a moment of stunned silence, Ron and Hermione glanced at each other, then glared. But nevertheless, they followed their bonded in silence, one after the other.

'It seems we're still within the castle, since Apparition doesn't work,' Harry said, his tone one that would broach no argument. 'The stun wouldn't last, so I put a stasis on Longbottom.'

'When did you-' Hermione started, but was cut off by the warning look Harry sent her.

They walked along tunnel after tunnel, through darkness and shadows. They wanted the tunnels to end, but with each, there was

an apprehension humming through the bond that none could singularly call their own. And then, at last, they came to what seemed to be a dead end, a solid wall. But on this wall were two snakes craved into stone.

They looked strangely alive as Harry approached and as he hissed, 'Open.'

The wall cracked open, the halves smoothly disappearing as they parted. As one, they slipped into an offensive formation – Harry in the front, Ron and Hermione side by side behind him, the three points of a triangle. Slowly, and with quiet steps, they walked inside into a very long, dimly lit chamber. Towering pillars rose up above them, trapped in the curling embrace of carved serpents. Great drums of flames were placed at the foot of these pillars, casting long black shadows across the chamber's expanse.

For a moment as they stood still, the carvings seemed alive in the gloom and the shadows filled with attackers, who waited, biding their time. But at the very end of the chamber, in the golden light of the flames and across the flagstones, lay a small black-robed figure.

Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.

As Harry stared at the girl, at her yellow-rimmed robe and long brown hair that fell over stone, he wondered who she was. Another victim of a Horcrux? He had no doubt about that. Her magic was fading, her presence diminishing. She was being drained.

'Ah, I have visitors,' a soft, collected voice said.

Not far from them, stood a tall, dark-haired boy who was leaning against a pillar. His arms were crossed, his expression almost smug. As he watched them with speculative eyes, Harry forcibly stopped a shiver going down his spine. This boy was handsome in a way Harry

had only ever attributed to one other person, no, to one monster. Such beauty that dragged you in, deceived and hurt you in the most awful of ways, leaving you and your everything unsalvageable. Such beauty that made you a monster in turn.

'Who might you be?' the boy said, his accent perfectly enunciated. Gracefully, he pushed himself off the pillar and unfolded his arms, letting pale hands fall to his sides. 'I was expecting someone else. Well, I wasn't really expecting anyone, I must confess. No one has ever found this place. Before now, I guess.'

'Who are you?' Harry said, his voice neither cold nor warm. It was neutral, giving nothing away.

The boy smiled, a slow, almost sensual smile that made one feel like they had just been let on into a secret that only they and he knew. 'My name is Tom Riddle.'

Hermione saw it first – the boy's body was blurred around the edges. It was like looking at him through a misted window. Along the bond, she sent a wave of caution. Then without so much as a glance towards her bonded, she took a step forward, her wand hidden behind her cloak.

'Let the girl go,' she said quietly. 'You're draining her dry.'

Riddle chuckled behind a hand. 'My, you three are interesting.' There was a gleam in his eyes that none of them liked. 'So very young, but those eyes of yours tell a different story all together. An anomaly, that's what you are, and an interesting one at that.' Riddle brought his eyes to Harry, then to the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead. 'Now, you, pretty boy - in my memory, there only ever was one person marked with that very same scar you're sporting. And he didn't live long. I made sure of that.'

Harry had to bite back the disgust that he wanted to show. 'I know.'

But there were many more others and now I'm the only one left – the only one who survived.'

'Ah, then what the girl said was true,' Riddle murmured, languidly glancing over his shoulder at her. 'I was defeated. Lord Voldemort was defeated by a mere child. How . . . disappointing.' He looked over at them again, boredom evident on his face. 'Please accept my apologies, dear guests, but I cannot allow you to survive any longer. You seem to know too much, more so than I like. ' His eyes darkened, his mouth curved upwards. 'Surely you must understand.'

Riddle turned around to an immense statue of a face – of what the trio recognised as Salazar Slytherin's face, his likeness. Riddle opened his arms wide and then hissed, 'Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four.'

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck rose and his heart-beat quickened. Parseltongue. The basilisk was being called. The statue's mouth was moving, opening wide enough to allow a vast weight through.

'Don't look at its eyes,' Ron bit out, looking down at the ground. 'One look and we're dead.'

The ground shuddered as something hit the stone floor. He could hear the basilisk uncoil and move. Riddle hissed only two cold words: 'Kill them.'

Hermione used her wand to rapidly carve a rune into the air, her eyes closed. She cut her palm with a wordless spell, then grabbed the rune, pulling it into her skin, shaping it with blood across the wound. 'Quattuor Voluntas,' she said under her breath. 'Sapor, auditurus esse, tactus, nidor.'

Her entire eye went black. Along the bond, the magic imbedded into the rune sped into Ron and Harry, turning their eyes black too.

Suddenly, they could see nothing but darkness, one which took the place of the world outside. But their other senses – hearing, touch, taste and smell – all heightened incredibly. They could smell and taste the musty, ancient gloom of the chamber, left untouched for decades, for centuries. They could smell Riddle, a lingering scent that was strengthening with every minute, and the girl, her blood turning cold, her breaths tiny and haggard. They could feel the ground tremble beneath their feet as the basilisk moved, hear every curve of its body and as the scales meet against one another again and again.

Everything outside of them, everything their senses picked up, it felt as if they were all their own, like their beating hearts. There was no distinguishing between the senses, for they all came together to create an image that their eyes could not.

Move, they thought together, the word echoing into each others' minds.

With that one thought, they ripped all constrictions of the bond off and it erupted, burning through them, nigh consuming them. They were not three anymore, but one. Harry could feel everything that made Ron and Hermione who they were as if it were his own. He could feel every muscle, every contract and expand of their chests as they breathed. In that split second, their magic combined.

They scattered. Hermione jumped and ran behind a pillar, calculating the distance and place of the basilisk by the sound of its flickering forked-tongue and pants of breath. She whipped her wand out and ran to another pillar, yelling spells as she went, 'Conjunctivitus! Conjunctivitus! Conjunctivitus!'

One of her spells hit and the basilisk made a terrible noise, then it spitted in agony. The smell of blood ripped through their senses, leaving a metallic tang in their mouths. She had managed to blind it in one eye. Ron skidded to a halt when he got to the Hufflepuff girl,

and he rolled her over onto her back. He put his ear onto her chest – her heart-beat was dangerously sluggish and slow.

Harry switched his wand into his left hand and from the sheath strapped to his back, he withdrew the Sword of Gryffindor. The basilisk made to lunge at him – he could feel it in the change of air currents – but before he could dive away, it came at him too fast.

'Protego!' Hermione shouted, and Harry was knocked back a step by the forming charm. A rounded, white shield appeared before him, to which the basilisk hit and was smacked away from. The basilisk spat again, then whipped out its tail, hitting an exposed Hermione full on. There was a sickening crunch as she hit the wall.

'Hermione!' Harry shouted. In that instance he felt her pain shoot through him, and it felt crippling. 'Hermione!'

'Kill them, kill every last one of them!' Riddle hissed.

The basilisk turned on him, but he lashed out his sword and wand. 'Stop!' Harry yelled, and it froze. Suddenly, Riddle began to laugh.

'Oh, this is too sweet!' he said, his tone amused. 'Pretty boy, why didn't you tell me that you were a parselmouth? This changes everything! You're like me.'

'I'm not like you!' Harry roared, then he jumped forward and plunged the sword into the basilisk's side. He ripped it out in time, just before he would lose his grip on the sword's handle, but not before the serpent's tail whipped out and flung him across the ground. He could taste blood in his mouth and the skin had been scraped off the top of his hand. But it didn't matter, he had a fight to win and Ron was now at Hermione's side.

I have it –the Horcrux, Ron's thought shoved itself into his head, bringing with it an aching pain.

'Pretty boy,' Riddle said in a sing-song voice. 'That wasn't very nice.'

Harry's grip around his sword and wand tightened. Riddle's magic was gaining, and the girl was nearly almost nothing. They were running out of time. He spun round and started to run towards his bonded.

'Kill him!'

The basilisk shot forward and wrapped itself about Harry, constricting tighter and tighter, pushing the air out of him, trying to suffocate him. Harry had his sword-arm free and he thrust it out, just as the basilisk lunged forward. Harry gave a roar of rage as he drove the blade into the roof of the serpent's mouth, right up to the hilt. The basilisk swayed, its grip loosening around him, then keeled over sideways, making the chamber shudder from the impact.

He crawled away from the basilisk, dragging the sword behind him. Its tip scratched across the flagstones, making sparks. He heard the sword clatter to the ground at his feet, then he realised he couldn't feel his arm. He touched and groped at it and found his arm was utterly limp. He numbly stood still for a moment, as he felt the fang that pierced his skin, covered in poison, and felt the slick blood that ran down his arm and dripped off his fingertips.

He nearly collapsed from the white hot pain that seared through him suddenly. He bit back the gasps that wanted to come out as the poison spread through his veins. Harry clutched at his arm, then shakily wrenched the fang out. The skin had been burnt on the edges and blood came out in sluggish spurts from the wound. On his knees, he frantically drew in any breaths he could, curling into himself as if that would hide him away from the pain.

'Two down, one more to go,' Riddle said, as if he was lazily ticking things off a list. 'Well, I have one consolation for you three; this has

taken a little longer than I had expected.'

Harry couldn't even muster up the energy to feel angry – he felt so very tired and his remaining senses were dimming. The bond was sputtering off from him, choking on itself. Hermione's rune collapsed, and all of a sudden, they could see again, while their other senses lowered back to normal. Harry blinked a few times, then turned his head to the side to see Riddle saunter over, his hands in his pockets. The boy was clearer than before, nearly corporeal.

Then Harry heard it – the sound of running feet. He managed to lift his head up enough to glance to the side, only to see Ron dive and roll onto the ground, grabbing the nearest weapon he could – the basilisk's fang.

'No! Don't you dare!' Riddle yelled, for the first time having fear in his voice. But Ron lifted the fang above his head, then brought it down into the book he had thrown to the floor, his face filled with cold determination and contained fury.

A long, dreadful scream pierced the air. Ink poured out of the book, spurting up into the air, over Ron's hands and across his face. Riddle's scream was cut off abruptly, but his mouth was still open in a silent scream. As he writhed and twisted, his body flickered in and out of existence over and over again. But then he just disappeared.

A deep silence engulfed the chamber. Harry held his breath for a moment, trying feebly to savour their victory, but he couldn't. He dragged in a breath, hiding his face in his hand and knees, and let out a soft sob.

'Oh God, Harry, Harry . . .' Ron muttered as he came to his bonded's side. 'Don't you dare die on me, not now. . . come on, you bastard . . .'

Ron tugged Harry's arm away from his chest and inspected the

wound, frantically, shakily. When Harry glanced up at him, he saw Ron shaking his head incessantly, his eyes red-rimmed and brimming with tears. Hermione staggered over, her face ashen, and leant against a pillar. She was cradling her arm to her chest, and Harry could see the bone protruding out of the skin, so very white like the bones they had found on the tunnel floor.

'It's the venom,' Ron said quietly, not looking at her. Harry blinked, wondering why it sounded like he was hearing them from a distance. Ron was right to him . . .

'This can't be happening,' Hermione hissed, as she used the pillar to slide down to the floor. '. . . this doesn't make any sense . . .' Harry couldn't really hear her – it was like she was whispering so very softly, '. . . he has the blood in him.'

As he watched their mouths move, he gave into the darkness that embraced him.

xXx

Author's Note: Hello again, it's been a while. . . Sorry about the inconsistent updates these past months, but trust me, it's amazing I actually managed to get these chapters down at all. But anyway, hope you enjoyed the chapter!

It's rather interesting, most people estimated me to be an age a lot older than I really am. As a little tit-bit of information, I'm in my late teens, but I've been told I look like I'm twelve. Pah, that's genetics for you. I've also been told that I'm scary when I spout out words that most people don't understand, or have never even heard of before. Well, it is amusing to see them flounder, or try to act like they understand :)

Chapter 30 – Dying Inside

He became aware of the warmth first. Cloth and sheets wrapped about him, about leaden limbs and an aching body. For a while, an amount of time he knew not how long, he lay there behind the darkness of his closed eyes. He followed each and every breath he took in and let out – for it was something he could do instead of wondering over the deep quietness that had taken over his mind and body. He didn't try to move because he didn't want to break this moment.

'I know you're awake,' he heard a familiar voice say.

The words made his eyes flicker open, even though he didn't want them to. Slowly, Harry drew his mind away from the strange feeling of limbo within him and brought it back to the world outside of himself. He could smell sweat – from his skin, the sheets. And there was cigarette smoke, a smell so familiar that he almost couldn't imagine feeling safe without it.

'Harry,' the voice said, rough and tired. 'Come on, look at me.'

Suddenly, the thought of moving was an exhausting one. Harry wanted to close his eyes again and to drift back into a dreamless sleep, the kind he knew very little of. But the tiredness of that voice surprised him. He rolled his head to the side, to lay it against a pillow, and looked a while.

By the grate of a small stove-fire sat a boy with red-hair. There were no torches lit, not even candles, and only the orange light of the coals broke the dark gloom of the room. The boy was on the floor, lounging against the wall, one hand fixing the grate closed, while the other lay on his bent knees, a smoking cigarette between two fingers. His hair had turned the colour of dark red-wine, cast against pale and freckled skin. The boy's top shirt buttons were undone, and Harry could see the thin scars that went around his neck, again and again.

'Hey,' Harry murmured, in a quieter, raspier voice than he had wanted. 'What . . . what's going on? What happened?'

Ron's blue eyes were darker, duller than before. He stared at Harry, then looked down and ran a hand through his hair. It was an action so similar to Hermione's habit that it almost made Harry smile. They had effected one another in more ways than some, of that he was sure.

'You've been out about two days,' Ron said, tipping ash into a tray next to him. 'Hermione's in the Hospital Wing. The extent of her fractures was far beyond my level of expertise, so we had no choice. I know it's not ideal, but Pomfrey ate up the story I gave her. I had to look after you anyway.'

A frown took hold of Harry's face for a moment, before disappearing. 'The host?' he asked.

'Hermione's watching her, making sure she doesn't blab about the Horcrux,' Ron said, the golden light flickering across his face, deepening the dark shadows beneath his eyes. 'But there's no problem there – the girl hasn't said a word since she woke up. She's gone mute from the shock is my thinking.'

'Did you find out who she is?'

'Yeah,' Ron took a long drag from his cigarette, then let it out slowly. 'Susan Bones.'

Harry struggled to sit up, but his arms shook and his body didn't seem to want to co-operate. He could feel the sweat sliding down his back, from under his arms and along his sides. He glanced down at his hands, and watched them shake. Without looking up, he murmured, 'And Longbottom?'

'He woke up nice and warm in his bed up in Gryffindor Tower, after having a very strange dream,' Ron said promptly, without much feeling. He got to his feet and came to sit at Harry's side on the edge of the bed. Ron was silent as he propped up the pillows for Harry and as he helped him to rest up against them. As he sat back, he took his cigarette from his mouth and put his hands in his lap.

'You still haven't asked about yourself,' Ron said quietly. 'Do you remember much?'

'I remember our victory, and I remember the basilisk fang,' Harry said, closing his eyes wearily. Even the darkness behind his eyes seem to move, to spin. Perhaps he was fool to think that any darkness would give him a reprieve, a safe-haven from everything outside of himself.

'Aren't you going to ask how you survived its venom?'

'Why should I?' Harry asked, then opened his eyes. 'I'm alive now, aren't I?'

There was a moment of silted silence, till Ron said in a voice that was not quite stern, not quite angry: 'Just barely.'

Harry shrugged a shoulder.

'We need to talk, and you promised you would.'

For a brief instant, Harry wanted to claim total weariness and to curl into himself. He knew he wanted to hide away from the world, and that it was cowardly to do so, but he couldn't help wanting it. A part of him said it wasn't time yet, that he wasn't ready for this, for what was needed . . . But the way Ron was looking at him made all of his excuses void.

They had no time for this, for breaking down.

Harry sighed. 'Shouldn't Hermione be here for this?'

'She knows what I want to say,' Ron answered, looking away to the side. Harry studied him for a moment as he waited – he looked at those hands, those long, strong hands, worn away far too soon. Harry wondered how many people had met their deaths because of those hands – how many fell after one of those fingers pulled a trigger or that hand that threw a knife, a spell, a punch. He shook his head, ridding himself of such thoughts, because in the face of Ron's tired eyes that showed he was just holding the despair at bay, Harry couldn't think them. He just couldn't.

'I know what happened to you,' Ron said in a small but determined voice. 'And at one time, because of this bond we share, I felt too. But the difference is that I never experienced it like you did. I wasn't there. I've had time enough to take those memories of yours I saw and put them in the back of my mind, till they become only words. That's all they've become to me – words, little bits of knowledge that hold no meaning, no feeling. And I'm sorry for that, but it's the only way I've survived this and my own memories too. I have my own nightmares, which consumed me then, and consume me now.'

Ron brought his eyes up to Harry's. They looked at one another and as they did so, Harry could feel himself tremble, but he also saw Ron's eyes redden as if near tears. But he didn't cry, instead he carried on:

'We have this bond between us, and though we feel – we feel things differently sometimes. That's why we have to talk, Harry, because I can't understand everything I get from you through the bond. Neither can Hermione. You need to talk to us, to explain why you are acting and feeling the way you do. You need to do this, so we can help you when you need help. Like now. I know you may want to be alone. I know you feel ashamed at times. But think of this, don't we all? We've given up everything, Harry, and done things we're not proud of . . . but we knew that in the beginning, maybe not the full extent of

the price, but we knew. And we know that now, in this very moment. I know you want to hide, and I don't blame you for that, but you have to stop.'

'I know,' Harry choked out as he gripped the sheets tightly, letting the material bunch up between his fingers. 'I know, I know all of that.' He knew he was going to cry and he didn't want to, not now, not when he was supposed to be strong. 'I know what I have to do – what we have to do. But I'm so, so tired. We've been trying for so long. We've been living for so long with these nightmares that sometimes I don't think we're actually living. I feel sometimes we're just bodies with beating hearts and minds crazed by grief and rage and hate. Is there anything good in our lives? Tell me, Ron, is there?'

'I don't know,' Ron whispered. 'But we knew there was a price for choosing revenge.'

'I feel like I'm dying inside, more so every day, Ron,' Harry said, his voice thick, his chest shaking with every intake of breath. 'I feel like I'm becoming something else that's not me. Is living this life of hell worth it? I don't know anymore . . .'

A hand wrapped itself around Harry's, and he looked up, eyes brimming with tears, to see Ron close at his side. 'It's got to be worth it, because it's all we have,' Ron said quietly. 'It's worth it, because I met you and Hermione. It's worth it, because it led us to making this bond that I wouldn't give up for the world, no matter how much it irritates me at times. This revenge of ours is worth it, because it's the only thing keeping us upright. It's worth it, because it has to be.'

Ron encircled his arms around Harry, holding him close as he sobbed. Harry hid his face in his bonded's shoulder, his knuckles white as he gripped at Ron's shirt. He didn't want to let go, didn't want to stop, even though he knew he would have to. But at the same time he couldn't stop crying, and he hated himself suddenly for that, for being weak when he was supposed to be strong. They were

supposed to be strong, unbreakable, even though they were already broken.

'You know what I thought of when I saw you attack the basilisk and as you called out to Hermione, just as I did, so desperately?' Ron whispered emptily. 'I thought of my brother, Charlie. In that moment, I felt as if you were doing what Charlie did – throwing yourself into harm and death's way for no good reason. Even though you said you wouldn't. Even though I believed and trusted you. As I watched the basilisk wrap itself around you, I thought that you didn't care anymore – not for yourself, or who you left behind.' Ron brought his hand up into Harry's hair, ran it through the strands, then bunched them up in a fist. 'Don't ever do that again, mate. You know what is at stake. Our mission is more important than happiness, than anything you ever wanted.'

Harry unclenched his fist and let his hand fall. He closed his eyes and let his head rest on Ron's shoulder, just for a little while, he told himself, just for a little while. 'I know,' he said. 'You're right.' A bitter chuckle left him. 'Who are we to dream, the wicked ones with wretched souls? Who are we to dare to dream? We're nothing,' he laughed suddenly, a hopeless laugh. 'We're nothing.'

'Maybe,' Ron said. 'Maybe we are. But that doesn't matter.'

xXx

Hermione lay completely still on the bed, stopping herself from scratching at the skin above her mending bones. She could feel the magic of the potions Pomfrey had forced her to drink running through her veins, sickening her to her very stomach. She hated this feeling of being at the mercy of others, no matter how small the matter was. It brought no good memories.

In the two days she had been in Hospital Wing, Susan Bones had said nothing. When the girl hadn't woken up in the Chamber, Ron

had left her close to the Hufflepuff dormitories to be later found. The school nurse was baffled as to the cause of Bones' sudden muteness and instability of her magical core, of that Hermione was sure. She'd been watching, after all. And she could feel the magic of the girl escaping and twisting inside of her small body till it became indescribable.

It was wrong, and broken.

This girl, this Susan Bones, reminded Hermione of so many children of the war. There was no hope for them. They lost their mind to madness, their magic to the storm and their bodies to sickness and waste. They were the final testimony of the wrongs of war, the lasting, brutal consequence of actions past.

And that is why, when Hermione heard glass crack and break, she did not move. She lay completely still in her bed on that moonless night, listening as Susan Bones swallowed broken glass. She listened to her muffled chokes, her soft sobs, and as the girl slowly died.

Weak . . . you're too weak to see beyond your fears – to go beyond experience – and that is why I will not save you from your choice.

Hermione curled up into herself tightly, refusing the want to cover her ears. She had to face this . . . this decision.

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Chapter 31 – To Honour and Remember

When they entered the Great Hall, black drapes fell from the ceiling and down the wall behind the teacher's table. Ron, Harry and Hermione took their seats at the end of the Slytherin table, looking about all the while at the sombre faces and subdued talk amongst the students. It seemed that everyone was wearing a yellow ribbon tied about their upper arms – the teachers, even the Slytherins, who Hermione knew were prudent enough to sense when to be politically correct. As she looked up the long table, she could see many expressions of their housemates that clearly showed that they had no desire to be there – at a relatively unknown, half-blood's memorial.

Ron touched her hand and she turned to him, only to see him spell a ribbon around her arm. She watched him, as he gently handled Harry, murmuring words to the dark-haired boy, who answered just as softly in reply. When he finished tying the last knot, Ron took Harry's shaking hand in his under the table.

The poison had not been kind to Harry. Hermione could see it in the way he shook, his ever-so slightly trembling lips, which he bit now and then to hide this fact. She could see it in the way his hands had become thin, bony and pale enough to see the blue veins underneath. Below his eyes, the shadows had widened and darkened, even turned purple in the corners. He was not the picture of health and even the glamours they had dared to apply could not hide this.

But it could be worse, Hermione reminded herself. Infinitely worse.

She had had suspicions at first. Harry was a parsel-mouth, but did the effect of Voldemort's blood in his veins only go that far? She'd thought: what if the blood had given him other attributes? On the side while she had been studying, she delved into history of Salazar Slytherin once more. She didn't find much, some convoluted passages in archaic English, all of which still made little sense even

after extensive translation spells. But the one thing that came up over and over again was the image of a wizard who was half human, half snake.

She began to think of the possibilities the more she saw that image. What if Harry was gifted with abilities beyond that of a normal wizard? It was only that one thought, that one small hope, that had filled her the moment she saw the basilisk's fang sink into Harry's arm, as she stared helplessly through the blood, sweat and pain.

Hermione tensed when she felt a touch on her hand, which made her glance down quickly. She hid her surprise as best she could as she stared at Harry's hand. Slowly, she watched as he grasped her hand in his own. Hermione looked up again, unable to rid her mind of the image of that tiny hand, so small next to hers. A strange feeling went through her, a sensation as strong as it was fleeting, that whispered in her ears that she could break that hand so very easily in that moment.

It would just take a second, it whispered.

But its words sickened her. She did not want this power over Harry. She didn't want anyone to.

Yes, Harry was weak now, but the blood that flowed in his veins was far stronger than anyone's in this hall. No-one, not even Ron and herself, could've survived a basilisk's venom. For that, a part of her was thankful; a part she found treacherous and elusive. It was the Dark Lord's blood, though Harry despaired at its existence in him, it had saved his life nevertheless.

The blood that survived the most powerful venom known to the world.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. She placed her other hand around Harry's, just holding it, feeling the coldness of his

skin. Feelings that were not her own ghosted up, like the gentle rise of a tide, among her own emotions and Hermione found herself breathless for a long moment. Her connection to the bond was stronger than usual now that they were physically touching, so the resigned desperation, the fear that made him grip onto his feeling of purpose all the more fiercely swept through Hermione from Harry like a cresting, then breaking wave.

It scared her slightly to be the one who was stronger – Harry and Ron were the strong ones before, steady, constant in their actions, but now she couldn't help but feel they were crumbling around the edges. She had been the uncontrollable one, the loose cannon, who they kept in place. But now . . .

Perhaps we aren't strong enough for this . . .

She shook her head slightly.

The chatter turned into to a low mumble when Dumbledore entered the hall and made his way up to the teacher's table. Hermione felt a pair of eyes on her then as she watched the Headmaster. Without a change in her expression, she stole a glance over her shoulder. Neville Longbottom stuck out in the crowd - he was the only Gryffindor not looking up at Dumbledore. He was staring at her, then at Harry and Ron, a frown on his young face that spoke of his thoughts in volume. He looked at them like they were a puzzle he had to unravel.

Hermione refused to frown as she mused that perhaps they had pushed 'coincidence' as the reason for their actions in regard to Longbottom a little too far. They couldn't have the boy's suspicions, or too much attention would be brought upon them. Let alone attention from those who had no qualms with reading Longbottom's mind. Memory Charms could only do so much and they were very noticeable to those who knew how to look.

They had to be careful with the boy from now on.

The hall became very quiet when Dumbledore stepped up onto the podium. 'The end,' Dumbledore said, his expression grave as looked at the sea of faces before him, 'of another year.' He paused while he clasped his hands together, resting them on the top of the podium. 'But this is not the only ending that has happened in these halls. This night, I would like to acknowledge the loss of a precious person – a student that should be sitting here, enjoying our Leaving Feast with us. As you all know, I am talking about Susan Bones.'

There was a single sharp draw in of breath, though soft, it sounded extremely loud in the silence of the Great Hall. Hermione's eye flickered to the Hufflepuff table to see Zacharias Smith cover his face with a hand, his shoulders hunched and trembling. At the boy's side, Justin Finch-Fletchly placed a tentative hand on that shoulder, his face pale and drawn with worry and sorrow.

'I find myself here, commemorating the little time Susan had with us at Hogwarts. Though it was short, it must be cherished for we were lucky to have that time at all. For Susan Bones was one of the children who survived the most horrific aspect of the war that beset our world many years ago: Lord Voldemort's Experimental Labs.'

Gasps rippled through the hall, but at the use of Dark Lord's name or at this unrevealed fact, Hermione did not know. Perhaps it was the mixture of both.

'All of you here know that there are Experimental Victims among you and you may know bits and pieces of what happened in those Labs, but not of how deeply damaging they were. The Victims here are the few who were strong enough to live past the source of their nightmares – and for that you should respect them. They, unlike Susan, have not given in yet.' Dumbledore lifted his goblet up into the air and said, 'So together, let's raise our goblets to honour Susan and to honour the Experimental Victims who stand tall and proud, and

most of all, alive with us today.'

Through the forest of raised arms, Hermione could see Smith silently crying, his arms limp at his sides. Justin Finch-Fletchly was sending mutinous glances towards Dumbledore, while one of his hands stayed defiantly on the table, the other tight around Smith's shoulder, his knuckles white.

'Susan Bones,' the hall rumbled, before everyone lowered their goblets to their tables once more.

As Hermione stared at Smith, at the tears on his face that made him look incredibly young, she thought: Some of us are hardly tall. Some of us will never be proud. The sheer extent of the defeat we have felt will not let us truly feel 'alive'. We can't live like others have lived.

She stifled a smile of contempt and wished she could say: 'Get your facts right, sir.'

xXx

He stared out of the window at the fog as the Hogwarts Express sped through it like a dividing arrow. The world outside had turned gray, featureless and flat, into an almost unreal nothingness. Sunless, moonless, just gray, the in-between of light and shadows.

It made Draco feel like he was only thing alive in the world.

The boy glanced around the empty compartment he was sitting in, then peered at the closed sliding door for a moment, before he caught himself and stilled. He frowned down at the floorboards. Why was he waiting? He knew no-one would come. No friends, no-one and nothing. He was alone.

Why does it hurt? he thought fiercely. It shouldn't hurt. Something as petty as loneliness shouldn't hurt.

He looked down at his arm and saw the yellow ribbon. Everyone had one. But why did he feel a sudden rush of guilt whenever he saw it? The girl was dead – dead from her own choosing, her own making.

Just like Mother.

Why did he feel like he had had a part in pushing the girl towards suicide? Sure, he demanded things from her unfairly, but . . .

You called her useless, a little part in the back of his mind whispered evilly, gleefully.

Draco suppressed a shudder and brought his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. There was no point in speculating. The girl was dead. Nothing would bring her back. He could feel guilty or try shift the blame, but she wouldn't be coming back. He barely knew her, so what was there to miss? He shouldn't be feeling sad, or that the world was just that little bit smaller and darker than before. She had been nothing in his life – so why was she consuming his thoughts now?

You called her useless, utterly useless . . .

He ran a hand through his hair, his forehead pressed against his knees, and drew in a deep breath. He tightened his grip and blond strands bunched up between his fingers. He held his breath and listened to the silence. As he let out a breath, then took in another, he thought it funny that in the last year he had gotten used to the quiet. Before this year, before his mother, he would've never thought it possible for the world to be this quiet . . . this empty.

His father would've scolded him for sitting as he was – a Malfoy never sits like a peasant, but with impeccable elegance, my son. But Draco didn't care. That father, the father he loved, was gone. He had disappeared with his mother on that day, but his body had chosen a

far longer, painful death than her. Lucius Malfoy had chosen a way that would numb him all the way to death's door, and he would slip past its threshold silently on ghostly feet.

No, that man wasn't his father. That man wasn't a Malfoy anymore.

But who cares? The Malfoys are nothing now.

Why couldn't Draco be like Potter? He, Granger and Weasley seemed above everything else, so elusive and what he wanted to be like. Nothing slipped past their masks. Their walls were impregnable, and even all the attempts of their fellow housemates had done nothing to chip away at those walls over the years. Even all of Draco's attempts at breaking them had ended in his humiliation. They breezed past every slander like they had never been uttered at all. They passed all their subjects with ease, against all the odds of them being mudbloods and blood-traitors.

And most of all, they were Experimental Victims and they were surviving.

Why couldn't he be like them?

xXx

With the bitter tang of firewhiskey still lingering in his mouth and the chill wind that swept up past through the rafters, Severus Snape stood brooding alone. His hands were wrapped around the stone banisters of the small balcony of sorts that was attached to the Owlery. The moon was hidden by clouds and the ground below was left darker without its light. Silhouettes of the treetops of the Forbidden Forest lay against the starlit skyline, undisturbed, yet almost threatening in its stillness. It was like a predator lying in wait for its prey.

Severus did not appreciate the irony.

Never in his wildest dreams did ever think he'd ask them for help. He never thought he'd stoop so low. But he now knew that they were running out of time, that this was not a matter of pride or hatred or of things wrongly done in the past anymore.

It had always been something greater than that, more infinitely precious, whenever Lily's son was concerned.

Though Severus despised how useless he felt by admitting it – he knew that his place in helping Harry Potter had gone as far as it would go. He could not change history. There were too many things between them; too many unchangeable things. Such things as the Dark Mark on his arm, or the white mask he had donned so many years ago.

But they had a chance. They were the only ones left who did.

Severus looked down at the letter in his hand. A part of him wanted to crumple it in his fist and throw it out into the night, leaving it to the mercy of the elements and the unforgiving world outside. But another part of him knew that sending this letter was the right thing to do.

He had tried every other option. The letter was his last resort.

When he looked up at the fluttering owls above his head, he suddenly wished he had brought his bottle of firewhiskey with him. Drink had always made him reckless, and in that moment, he needed a bit of liquid courage.

An owl hopped towards him along the banister and when it was close enough, it stuck out a leg patiently. The man stared at it, then shook his head and sealed the letter without a word. He felt almost numb, but he stubbornly put that down to the firewhiskey. He rolled the letter up, trying to get that last flash of those words he had penned not long ago out of his head. Those words, those simple words that still made

him sick to his stomach with bitterness and barely contained rage: 'To Sirius Black and Remus Lupin.'

He felt listless and not quite attached to the ground as he watched the owl fly off into the distance. Something had to come out of this though.

If they believe me, that is, he thought bitterly, then turned away.

xXx

Author's Note: Second Year is finally over! I've planned most of Part 3, and damn, I've got some exciting stuff coming your way –evil grin- Hope you enjoyed the chapter, even though it's a little short.

And oh yeah, tell me what you think of my writing. I've been reading strange books lately (one that was written in the 1920's and seriously, they had one of a kind purple prose in those days) and it always effects how I write. Please tell me if I go all flowery on you guys, okay?

Part 3 : Third Year

Chapter 32 – Going, Going, Gone

He turned the keys and the door opened with a soft click. Glancing up the hallway, then down, Harry stood for a moment, his eyes narrowed beneath the rim of a hat and his hand wrapped around the door handle. He slipped into the apartment room, their safe-house for the night, and at a glance it was empty. He tentatively reached out through the bond, and immediately knew that Ron and Hermione were not close.

He took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. Hermione was probably still at their next hit's house, trying to find the incriminating evidence the man had stolen from their employer. Ron had gone off on watch duty, following their hit to find out his habits and schedule, and perhaps some blackmail material as well. Harry shook his head – more as an attempt to rid his every breath of the tightness that had taken hold of his chest, one that wouldn't ease until the bond was released from the strain it had been put under, till Ron and Hermione were at his sides.

The further we go from one another these days, Harry thought as he pulled off his coat, the harder it gets.

He sat down on the couch with a frown. He made to rub his face with his hands, but then he stilled. He stared down at his hands; they had become so small. He watched them tremble and shake, and though he had tried to hide this fact for a long time now since school had ended, he knew his bonded could see that he was weak. They could feel it even when they held his hand.

He didn't know how he felt about that.

Sure, he knew that it was out of his control to an extent – the venom was nothing to be trifled with and it had left its mark on him. He could

still feel the ache and burn of the scar the basilisk had left on his arm. Sometimes, when he woke up at night, he swore he could still feel the fang piercing his skin and the poison injecting into his veins like liquid fire, bringing with it a pain his heartbeat quickened at remembering.

The boy held back a sigh, then after a moment, he realised that the quiet of the room was not right.

I'm not alone, Harry thought, slowly becoming still.

The ward that surrounded him flickered a warning to the right, a split-second before a gloved hand roughly covered Harry's mouth. His head was forced back against the couch and he could feel the cold steel of a knife pressed against his throat.

'If you try anything, Harry Potter, I'll slit you open,' a voice hissed into his ear.

Harry didn't wait a second longer - he pressed his head back further into the couch and his hand shot forward, grabbing the blade in the small space he had made between it and his neck. He felt the bite of the knife as it cut into his hand.

Apparate.

His magic surged and he appeared with a crack just behind his attacker. He lashed out a coiled fist, catching the man on the side of his head, which sent him skidding across the floor. The knife spun away under the couch with a screech, leaving spiralling trails of sparks in its wake. Harry whipped out his wand as the man groaned and struggled to get up from the floor. As Harry took a step forward, he said, 'Petrificus Totalus.'

The attacker went as stiff as a board, his arms and legs snapping together. His wand still trained upon the man, Harry quickly stripped

him of his weapons. He found knives and handguns – the man was a short distance assassin, of that he was sure. Beyond that though, Harry didn't recognise him.

Had he been kinder, and perhaps not assaulted as he was, Harry would've given the man a quick end. But the man knew his name, and from the way he had said it, Harry was certain he knew who they were in the underworld of London.

Someone had tried to assassinate the Devil's Spawn.

He heard two loud cracks and saw Ron and Hermione run towards him, the bond thrumming with anxiety. 'What happened?' Hermione burst out, her wand and dagger at the ready.

Harry sent flashes of images along the bond, then pointed his wand-tip at the man. 'I'm just about to find out,' he murmured, staring down into fearful eyes. 'Legilimens.'

Harry bit his lip as the man fought against the body-bind in small, frantic jolts, his eyes rolling upwards as if he was having a fit. Harry dropped his wand, then jerked back with a grimace. His eyes darkened, changed, even when he cleared his face of all expression. With one quick movement, Harry slit the man's throat.

'That bastard,' he hissed, before he brought his eyes up his bonded. 'He was sent to kill us, but he wasn't the only one.' He slammed his knife into the floorboards. 'Shit! We've been betrayed. That fucking bastard!'

xXx

The table was long and empty, its surface polished till it shined. Draco stared down its length till his eyes invariably fell onto the only occupied chair at the very end. The man that sat there was quietly sipping from a wineglass, his long blond hair unkempt as it hung over

his shoulders and over his eyes. An ugly scowl crept onto Draco's face – this man was not his father.

His father wouldn't be doing this to him.

His hands rolled into fists, and the boy found he liked the sharp pain of his nails as they cut into his palms. The action had always made it easier to control the anger. He took in a deep breath, bit his lip, then let it go, before he took a step forward - then another, and another, till he was almost running.

He didn't want to be in control anymore.

He grabbed the man's arm, causing the wineglass to fall and shatter on table, spilling red. Draco's expression twisted with anger, denial and grief, as he tugged on the man's arm. He didn't know what he was doing – for once in his life, he hadn't thought anything through, hadn't planned every action and pre-empted each reaction.

'Who are you?' he yelled, his eyes wide. He could feel the tears burning up to the surface and brimming. 'Who are you?! You're nothing! Absolutely nothing!' He splashed the red wine from the tabletop at the man's face. 'This is what you breathe! Is this your every thought, you bastard! Tell me! Say a fucking word!'

There was resounding slap. Draco stumbled back, a hand on one of his tear-stained cheeks. He gasped in a breath through a sob, then turned and ran from that hand that had risen to hurt him. He ran and ran, till he locked himself in his room and threw himself onto his bed. He bit his hand just below his thumb to try drown out the sobs, and stricken as he was, he felt none of the pain as his skin bruised black between his teeth.

He was shaking, all over his body. No-one had ever hit him before, not once. His father had made sure of that. His father had kept him safe. But now nothing made sense. He hid his face in his pillow and

suddenly he had the overwhelming urge to laugh. To laugh and laugh, till he disappeared into nothing as if he had never existed at all. And because nothing mattered anymore, because his father wasn't there to scold him for it, he gave into that urge.

He laughed at the way his cheek stung. He laughed at the shameful tears on his face. He laughed and laughed, because even after reacting violently, that man's eyes were empty through it all.

He laughed, then screamed.

xXx

The evening light stretched across the room in bands from the open windows, bringing in a small breeze and the smell of the city outside. On the couch, Hermione sidled over to Ron, put an arm over his shoulders and plucked the cigarette from his mouth. As she took in a drag, the end of it glowed red and the light shone in her eye. Ron gave her a side-long look, an eyebrow raised, then glanced down at her hand still on his shoulder. But he said nothing, instead stared ahead towards the doorway.

Behind them, Harry sat at the kitchen table, a hand wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee. He was looking out of a window, face bathed in a deep orange light, his eyes half-closed in the face of the setting sun.

The sound of a bunch of keys, then the turn of a lock, did not perturb them. Hermione put her head on Ron's shoulder as she passed his cigarette back, and Harry brought his cup to his mouth. A door slammed closed – there were fast-paced footsteps, one after the other in brisk, sharp movements. Ron blew out a cloud of smoke just as Fere Asper came to stand in the doorway.

The man stared at them for a moment, stock-still. He hid his shock well, though it still lingered in his eyes. Fere blinked, then walked

forward and threw his keys and wallet casually onto an armchair. They watched him as he unwrapped his scarf from his neck, then took off his jacket.

He still did not meet their eyes.

'You're sober,' Hermione said quietly, with mild surprise. She sat up straight and put her hands in her lap as she leant forward. 'Now that's unusual.'

Fere's hands were shaking slightly, showing the fear Ron had expected. His eyebrows furrowed quickly, then smoothed over just as fast. 'I've been busy,' he said curtly, staring down at his jacket over his arm.

'Evidently,' Ron said dryly, and from the way he had said it, Fere's head shot up.

'Your little assassin talked,' Harry said, causing Fere to stare at him instead. 'Is this a declaration of war?' The boy's tone was light, but dangerous.

'No, no, I don't want it to,' Fere Asper said quickly. 'I should've known . . .' he shook his head and couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice, 'I should've known that nothing would work against you three. You're just too damn good at what you do. But a guy's gotta try, right?'

He looked at them straight in the eye, defiant even in his resignation that was tinted with fear.

'No, you don't even try – not against us,' Ron answered, his eyes dark and unkind.

'I taught you too well, didn't I?'

'We've gone beyond you.'

'I'm aware of that,' their former teacher said. 'I've known that for a long time now.'

'Why now then? Why do you want us dead?'

'Some information leaked, from God knows where – and I'm now being targeted because of you.' The man sat down on the armchair without much grace, his hands in his hair. 'Already, I've had to deal with four assassins. As fun as it is, I'm killing all my competition and perhaps a few potential employers too. I need to cut ties with you if I want to continue being in this business.'

'Bullshit,' Hermione cut in. 'You'd have no business if we left – we're your shining stars, your biggest hook. I've heard you myself - you tell prospective employers that if they want a job done perfectly, then without a doubt, they need the Devil's Spawn.'

'And even if you cut ties with us, they'd still come after you,' Ron added in as he crushed his cigarette in the ashtray.

'It probably wasn't the best of plans, and though it doesn't mean much right now to say it, but I didn't want to resort to sending people to kill you. But they have been just coming and coming, and there are few places safe left for me. I admit that I attacked you out of fear . . . but once the information that I taught you three came out, my sources have dwindled and some have out-right refused to sell to me. I'm being ostracised and stalked in my every waking moments. I've been looking over my shoulder for days, weeks, certain I'd see Death a few steps behind,' Fere said, his voice getting softer and softer. 'No-one can live like that. Not for long, or they'd go mad.'

'You're lucky that you're still useful to us,' Hermione said coldly, crossing her arms. She shared a look with Ron, then turned to Fere once more. 'Tell us who sent those assassins and we'll make an

example of them – so no-one will dare come near you again, or refuse your wishes. We'll show them that no-one messes with the Devil's Spawn. We'll have them running back to their holes, shivering and shitting themselves in fear.' She grinned at him, toothily, looking like a cat who had sniffed out a rat.

Fere Asper stared at them warily. In his eyes, it was easy to see that he was exhausted, and just that little bit desperate. Reluctantly, he nodded to them.

Hermione clapped her hands together over a satisfied smile and got up to her feet. Ron and Harry stood up to follow her, just as she stopped at Fere's side. She put a hand on his shoulder, and he flinched slightly, staring resolutely at the floor.

She leaned down and whispered into his ear, 'We'll know if you really want to kill us. Have no doubt about that. We have our ways and our means, sir.'

She patted his shoulder as she straightened. With her bonded at her sides, they walked out of the room, leaving a wide-eyed man in their wake.

'Home?' Ron queried, as he held the door open for them to pass through to get onto the street.

Hermione frowned, then pulled down her sleeve to stare at her wand strapped to her inner-arm. Its tip was glowing purple. Her frown deepened into a scowl. 'No,' she said. 'We've got one more worm to dig out of the apple, boys.'

xXx

Neville sat stiffly on a stool, his hands on his knees, his unblinking eyes wide. There was a feverish tint to his eyes that would've told anyone who looked that he was fiercely trying to keep the tears at

bay.

On the bed next to him, an old woman sat propped up by pillows. Her gray hair was long and braided, pulled over a frail shoulder. Once, she had had a strong face, but now it was all hollows and lines and dark shadows under her glassy eyes. She did not move, except for the shaky in and out of her chest as she breathed.

'You should be proud, my boy.'

Neville lifted his head and stared up at the grave, but kindly face of Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard smiled at Neville and continued, 'Your grandmother wouldn't want you to be ashamed. She protected you, as was her right and duty. Without her, you wouldn't be alive. Never forget to be proud of her.'

The boy looked at his grandmother again. 'Sir, can you . . . please leave me alone with her?'

Dumbledore nodded in understanding. He parted the white dividing curtains and went, but not without calling out a farewell to both the boy and the woman. He left Neville to nothing but silence, sorrow and regret, as he walked down the bustling Spell Damage ward of St Mungo's Hospital.

xXx

High up on a fire-escape, Harry sat with his back against the brick wall. He stared down at the alley-floor, the whites of his eyes bright in the shadow of the apartment building. There was a rifle at his leg; it rested against his chest and shoulder, its tip against the wall and far higher than his head. He experimentally blew out a breath, only to see it in the cold.

'Report,' a voice crackled from his ear-piece.

'Alley clear, no sign of target,' Harry answered promptly, holding the microphone pinned to his jacket collar close.

'Rodger,' Ron said a moment later.

Harry sat up and looked from one side of the alley to the other with narrowed eyes. He could see the streetlamps from where he was positioned, their yellow light illuminating an empty, quiet street. No cars had passed in a while, not even a cab. Try as he might, Harry couldn't feel at ease in suburbia – he was too used to brazen loudness of the city, not this silent, but warm intimacy of these rows of little houses. Even the apartment buildings were small and different. He didn't like them.

'Incoming,' Hermione said curtly. 'West entrance.'

Harry sent a wave of acquiesce through the bond, though strained from the distance between them as it was. He flipped his rifle over and peered through the scope. A figure walked into the mouth of the alleyway – a hat and long coat hiding them till they went into the shadows. Harry readied the rifle, the centre of the crosshair steady on the person's head.

'Target in sight, within range,' Harry whispered unblinkingly. His finger curled around the trigger.

'Suspicious confirmed,' Ron said, his voice lowered and distorted. 'Fire.'

'Rodger.'

Suddenly, wards flared into life around the perimeter of the alleyway – cutting off it from the outside world, not letting a sound through. Harry grinned in his hood, watching the figure as they startled and tried to run - but he had pulled the trigger.

The figure's head jerked to the side with the force of the bullet. Like a puppet cut from its strings, the figure collapsed to the ground and lay limp. Harry swung the rifle onto his back and withdrew a pistol, before he scaled down the fire-escape. When he came up to the body, he sensed Ron and Hermione from either side of the alley as they tore down their erected wards and ran to him.

They found Harry crouched down next to the corpse, pushing their target's hat off with his pistol, a contemplative look on his face. Dead eyes frozen with an expression of shock and fear stared up at the sky behind a pair of glasses. Blood pooled on the pavement.

'Nathan Riley,' Harry murmured, standing up. 'A pity. He was useful.'

'The moment he tried to get our spell removed, his usefulness ran out,' Hermione said disdainfully. 'The only pity here was that we didn't get to try that curse out – I've never seen a person die from a heart-attack before. I was looking forward to it.'

Harry's eyes flickered to Hermione and he shook his head slightly in exasperation. 'We've got to get rid of this,' Harry said, gesturing towards the body. 'Take his corpse to his home - make it look like a burglary gone wrong.'

'We know what to do,' Ron said, waving a hand dismissively. 'And you? Where are you going?'

'I'm going to search for someone fitting to frame,' he said, looking down at Riley. 'A killer fit for this crime.'

Harry stared at the man's face, etching every detail into his mind – the dark blood, his matted hair, that expression only those who died violently could portray – before he caught himself. There was no need to remember this man. His death was one out of the many, which would disappear into the back of his mind with time, filed and locked away till it was useful to them again.

He could feel the last flickers of Riley's magic around the body – a shield that glowed, then disappeared. Harry put his pistol back into its holster and smiled a grim smile.

Typical. Trust a wizard to forget about muggles and their own special kind of brutality.

xXx

Author's Note: Thank you, guys, for your wonderful reviews last chapter :) They made my fingers dance over my keyboard, frankly.

Chapter 33 – We Are Machines

Down a darkened cobbled pathway, the smacks of boots landing in water and mud sounded loudly. Two figures were silhouetted for a moment, then disappeared in the darkness of the trees overhead. They came into sight again with the flashes of a blue light atop a car in the street. At the end of the pathway, they stopped at the front door of a small house and together they knocked on it with gloved fists.

They waited in the golden gloom of the light hanging above the door. At the sound of approaching footsteps inside, the shorter one – a woman – straightened her hat and glanced uncertainly up at her partner. At the jangle of keys and the opening of a lock, her face became grim.

'I can't believe you'd dare to show your bloody face, Nathan, after not calling for days -' came an angry voice as the door was pulled wide open by a red-faced woman. She froze when she saw the two police officers standing on her doorstep.

'Are you Mrs Riley?' the policewoman asked.

The woman gave a curt nod. Her grip tightened around the doorframe and her knuckles turned white. Her eyes flickered from one officer to the other, then paled when she saw their expressions. She shook her head from side to side slowly, as if in a daze.

'I have some bad news, ma'm. . .'

xXx

THE END OF AN AGE: LOCKHART A FRAUD!

The wizarding world is still reeling from the shock of the allegations against Gilderoy Lockhart being proven true, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent of the Daily Prophet. As an author of ten

bestselling books, winner of many prestigious awards such as an Order of Merlin, Third Class and an honorary membership with the Dark Force Defence League, Lockhart gained fame through criminal means and fooled us all! Anonymously, critical information against Lockhart was left at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, where Aurors found it. They followed up these dire claims and the presence of Gilderoy Lockhart's magical signature was found on many unfortunate wizards and witches – all in the form of Memory Charms! In front of the Wizengamot and with a dose of veritaserum, Lockhart admitted to his crimes of memory theft, fraud and deceit. Lockhart has been put under house arrest and constant guard since his trial, pending the Wizengamot's decision of his fate. His properties, possessions and royalties have been repossessed by the Ministry of Magic to pay for the compensation of his victims . . .

xXx

Severus Snape looked up from his book on his lap to frown. He stared at the door and his dark eyes narrowed at the resounding knocks that rattled the wood of it. Slowly, without breaking his gaze, he slid his book closed then set it aside on his desk. His armchair groaned as he pushed himself up to his feet. He made his way to the door, but stopped in front of it, his hand hesitant on the doorknob. His wards didn't recognise the magical signature of the person outside, though the feel of it was vaguely familiar.

He stood still for a moment, doubts and fear whirling around in his mind, and he withdrew his wand. Not many people knew of the whereabouts of his flat hidden away in the muggle world that he stayed in during the holidays and he wanted to keep it that way. But as the knocking became steadily louder, he wondered if he should let this person in. A large part of him wanted to spell the knocking silent and ignore it so he could enjoy an evening of firewhiskey and his decidedly good book. But another violent knock shook him out of his musings. Severus scowled and flicked the latch open. It was probably an ignorant muggle-born. He would blast the imbecile for-

The next thing he knew, something was shoved at his chest. His immediate reaction was to stab his wand into his assaulter's armpit – a small way from the heart, but one couldn't get more direct for a spell's path. There was a spell on the tip of his tongue, but he stopped when he saw who it was in front of him, albeit reluctantly.

'Is this true?' Sirius Black demanded, shoving a piece of paper – a letter, Severus realised belatedly – hard against his chest. 'Because if you're fucking around with me, Snape – I'll-'

'You'll do what?' Severus spat out, sneering. When Black opened his mouth again, Severus cut him off, 'Get your filthy hands off me. What are you doing here?'

'Why did you send this?!'

Severus' face twisted with disdain. 'I think that should be blatantly clear, even to you, Black. But perhaps I thought too highly of you and your ability to read those things called 'words'. I should've presumed that middle age was far too early for you to learn such things.'

'Shut up, you snivelling bastard-'

Severus took a step back, putting space between them, but still kept his wand trained upon the man. 'Still keeping up the old taunts? My, it must be a case of limited vocabulary. After Potter was murdered you evidently lost your creator of insults. But, yet again, even he was dismal at them. So you were doomed from the start, weren't you, Black?'

Sirius sucked in a deep breath. His shaking hands rolled into fists at his sides, the letter crunching up with them. In that moment that Sirius looked up with fiery eyes that showed he was barely keeping his anger in check, Severus was struck by how old his school rival looked. It had barely been a decade since the war, yet from Black's

face it seemed far longer than that. There was a certain darkness about his eyes, a deep weariness that almost seemed feverish. Snape suddenly hated the fact he recognised that look, so similar to the one he saw the mirror each day. It was the look of one who had lost far too much.

'Look,' Sirius said tersely, 'I don't have time for this. Is Harry really alive?'

Taking a step back, Severus' expression became neutral, almost cut-off. 'Yes,' he answered quietly.

Severus wanted to sneer at the tentative light that spurted into life in Sirius' eyes, so bright, yet fragile. The man gasped in a shaky breath as he stared off to the side, the one corner of his mouth tugging upwards in a half-disbelieving way, but also with relief that seemed so intense that one couldn't fully describe it. But it did not last, for when Sirius looked at him again, his eyes were narrowed. They held a sharply suspicious glint. 'Are you telling the truth, because if you aren't, so help me-'

'You can go confirm it with Albus, if you so please,' Severus cut in with a bored tone. It took far effort than he liked to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

A stupid kind of joy flooded Black's face. The wide grin he wore wiped away the years, leaving Severus with a feeling of dread that dove to the bottom of his stomach, bringing memories he had not wanted to remember to the surface. He had been civil with the man so far, but recollections of their animosity back in their schooldays wouldn't allow for that. He had to shove his anger and those memories away – for Lily, and most of all, for her son.

'Where is Lupin?' Severus asked coldly.

Black's look became sheepish. 'He doesn't know I'm here,' he said,

then frowned, as if he just remembered who he was talking to. With a serious expression and tone, he started, 'Snape, why are you helping him? Why are you helping Harry? He's James' son after all. I thought you would've revelled in that fact that Harry has . . .' the glance he sent the letter in his hand was anguished, 'suffered.'

'I see no reason to answer that.'

Sirius glared at him, the anger burning again in his gaze. 'Why not?'

'Unlike you, I stayed. I deal with these children on a day to day basis and see their scars. Does it surprise you that with time people change?' Severus said, then tilted his head to the side, his look calculating. 'But you didn't change, did you, Sirius Black? You still run away when the going is bad.'

Black took a step towards him, and for a moment it seemed he was torn between shouting and attacking him. Instead, he brought his fist down upon the empty air. 'How dare you! I thought they were dead! Dead! I fought in that war till the very last second!' he yelled fiercely.

'And then what? You ran away, avoiding responsibility yet again,' Snape sneered. 'Did you even stay for their funeral?'

'There was nothing left of them!' Sirius then gulped in a breath, trembling with what Snape wasn't entirely sure was just rage anymore. He shook his head quickly, then said in a softer, bitter voice, 'What is the point of crying at slabs of stone and empty coffins?'

'Did you even look for him?'

The man froze, then his body seemed to be taken over by small movements. His head fell forwards and long dark hair hung over his face, hiding it from view. His hands stilled, his fists relaxed. The trembling seemed to disappear like a breath of air. His shoulders slowly lowered, nearly submissively, like he had no energy left, no

strength to lean on, or even the will to do so. 'They told me he was dead. And after the war I left this sodding country and this bloody continent, because I thought I had nothing left there. How was I to know? How was anyone to know he was alive after all that bloodshed?' he whispered passionlessly, with a voice just above emptiness. 'Don't you dare look at me like that, Snape. Don't you dare blame me for leaving.'

'I will do as I please. None of your nonsensical babblings will change my mind on this matter.'

Sirius looked up at Severus, the nodded – not in agreement, that much was clear from his expression, but in dismissal. 'I shall take my leave,' he said, then left with the letter tightly clutched in his fist, as if it were a life-line.

And as Snape watched him go, he realised that it was and very nearly pitied the man. Well, almost, but he made sure he didn't. There were certain lines he'd never cross.

xXx

'... the corpse of the male victim was found tied to a chair – around his wrists, ankles and chest – in the middle of the hotel room, Number 202. The bruising around his ankles and wrists showed that the victim was conscious and struggled against the constraints. Physical violence was used as the victim had a black-eye and a large amount of bruising on his trunk and legs under the blood. Cause of death: four bullets to his person. Entry through the back of the head. On the wall behind the victim, a large smiley face with horns and a forked tail was painted in blood. Forensics confirmed the blood is the victim's. Identity of victim still unknown.

Aspects of this crime scene correspond with the serial killer/s case codenamed 'the Devil's Spawn'. The manner of this crime is exactly the same as the several other cases – the smiley face and the

headshots for example. . .'

-Extract from the No. 8 Crime Scene Report of the 'Devil's Spawn' Case, London Police

xXx

Author's Note: Writing this chapter was like getting blood out of a stone. Sorry for the shortness, but this is more of an interlude, I guess. It was weird not writing the trio in a chapter – well, not directly, but weird nevertheless.

Chapter 34 – Following The Trail

The cottage lay in a copse of trees, the only one around for miles. Kicking up dust on the dirt road that wound to and around the cottage, Harry stuffed his gloved hands into his pockets. He peered over his shoulder, and the dawn light flooded his face with a pale orange glow, dappled as it was because the light had made its way through the leaves. Harry took in a deep breath of air, and it was so cold that he felt it go down his throat and into his lungs. He felt the urge to cast a Warming Charm, but it passed quickly – they couldn't make any unnecessary risks, even if it meant being uncomfortable in the chill that had taken hold of the air.

'Ow,' Ron said poignantly, his voice belying his flat expression on his face to a large degree. He shifted in his seat on a fallen tree trunk. It was half rotten away, mold-ridden and grey, but it was the only thing he could sit on without getting wet from dew for a distance.

'Oh, stop complaining,' Hermione snapped back. She pulled the thread tight and cut it off, before tying a knot. 'That curse-trap you stupidly stumbled into made sure that no magic could be used in healing any wounds you received. As I don't know the counter-curse just yet – you're going to have bear with a few stitches.'

Ron experimentally moved his injured arm a little and winced. 'When I find that bitch . . .' he growled under his breath. Hermione gave him a look, then slapped him on his arm, just where she had stitched up his wound, causing him to grunt and give her a ridiculously hurt look.

'Shut up, and sit there quietly,' she said sternly, coldly. 'You've gotten into enough trouble today. Because of you, we lost time.'

Ron glared at her in such a way that clearly said he could care less. Harry sighed as he watched them start to snap at each other again, then turned his gaze back to the cottage. A part of it seemed to be overgrown with ivy and melded into the greenery around it. The door

and windows were small and narrow, the roof covered by pantiles; all indicating age, but also tender care. Slowly, Harry walked to the front door, which stood ajar, just enough to see inside.

Harry stilled when he saw, and then smelt, the blood that pooled at the frame and dripped onto the garden path stones.

Ron had been succinct and blunt in his descriptions – he was the only one who'd seen the bodies inside, but had to quickly retreat after he triggered a curse left in wait. Harry had seen afterimages of the scene from the bond, but Ron's words had filled in the gaps – he could clearly see in his mind's eye the old muggle couple, the wife curled into herself on the floor, her husband crawling to the door in search for help, his hopeless desperation still etched onto his face, even in death. His death-mask, Harry mused, with not much feeling beside a faint amusement at his dramatic choice of words. He glanced at Hermione and Ron, wondering with a mild curiosity what 'death-masks' they'd wear. Would it be triumph? Or despair? Harry shook his head to rid his mind of such thoughts.

There is no point in speculating, he thought.

'We should move on,' Harry said as he came close to his bonded. Both Ron and Hermione turned to him, then nodded sharply, silent for once in face of his gravity. 'It's blatantly clear she's been here.'

'She doesn't even try disguising that fact . . . ' Hermione murmured. 'It's like she wants to be followed.'

'Well, we are dealing with Bellatrix Lestrange. Sanity was never a strong point with her, even before Azkaban,' Ron said as he gingerly pulled his jacket on his arm again. 'Only a mad woman would taunt the platoons of Aurors tracking her.'

'We have no time to discuss the motives of a mad woman,' Harry said quietly. 'She's fast, and she's dangerous.' He glanced over his

shoulder, then frowned slightly. 'The Aurors aren't far, they've picked up her trail again.'

'You mean the scorched fields, the terrorised towns and the long line of muggle corpses spanning from the south-east coast to Scotland?' Hermione remarked dryly as she watched one of her spells dust away their footprints.

'Yeah,' Harry said, 'that trail.'

xXx

(1 September 1993)

Harry leant his head against the compartment wall, relaxing with the movement of the train as much as he could. He let his eyes settle on nothing in particular, nothing in any way fascinating: just the floor. He felt the urge to sigh, but didn't because he knew Hermione would hear it and then start sniping at him. He looked across at the other side of the compartment to see a Daily Prophet upright and pulled wide open. Hermione's hands and knees were the only telling things that there was a person behind the picture of the moronic grin of Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he glowered at the picture. There had been nothing –nothing - in the papers about the escape of Bellatrix Lestrange from Azkaban. He knew this since Hermione had been reading every day and every article that had been printed for weeks. It seemed the Ministry was content to hush the whole thing up, and let their Aurors deal with everything. The only reason the trio had heard anything about Lestrange's escape was because of the network of informants in the Ministry one of their former, and very grateful, employers had.

But for weeks – precious time that they had little of – had been wasted on hunting Lestrange. From the shores of Azkaban to the

wilds of Scotland, they had tracked her across country, following her 'decorated' trail.

They hadn't been a lone in chasing her – but they were always just ahead of the Aurors, because of a simple fact: their lack of qualms in using efficient, but darker magic in their search. What surprised Harry the most was the fact that the Aurors were ordered to capture Lestrangle alive. He couldn't believe their complacency at letting her live to escape again. But then again, the Ministry had been complacent after the war, so why would it be different now?

Harry bit at his lip and slipped his hand under his sleeve. He scratched at his scar absently, ignoring the slight prickling pain the action brought. The presence of the Aurors had made their tracking difficult. Not only did they have to worry about Lestrangle murdering them on whim, but the Aurors at their tails as well. That had meant extra precautions, so many that at times Harry's mind would spin – he no longer questioned Ron about their wards, just followed instructions painstakingly. He grimaced as he remembered the endless backtracking they had done to hide their presence and as they made fake trails. Those days and nights had been long – too long.

Harry clutched his hand into a fist when he felt it shake. This fatigue that clouded his body and mind reminded him of days before they had met Fere Asper. He had been weak then physically. But the difference between now and then, was that he had had control over that weakness – control over changing that weakness into strength. And he did. But with the venom still lingering in his body, he was shaking almost constantly as the fatigue stretched itself to every point of his body and made even one step hurt at times. He could feel his body weakening with every rest he took, with every surreptitious lean against a wall for support. Harry didn't complain, rather, he tried to hide it. They had no time for weakness, especially one that would get worse if he stopped moving.

I just have to get through this, Harry thought grimly.

'Stop scratching,' Hermione said as laid the newspaper on top of her legs.

Harry gave her a look. 'Why?'

'Because,' she drew out the word, her eye half-lidded, 'you'll rip those scars open again. And it'll bleed all over you, soak into your robes and ruin that new sparkly white shirt of yours. And then we'll have to go shopping again for hours because we'll just have to pop into that new potion shop in Diagon Alley to get those ingredients I've been dying to get.' She folded the newspaper and set it aside, then clasped her hands together on her lap. 'You getting my drift, dear?'

Harry glared at her, then sullenly separated his hands, putting them on either side of his legs. 'I get it. You don't have to be so polite, you know.'

Hermione crossed her legs. 'All right. Then stop fucking scratching. If you do it again, I'll give you something else worry about. I'm still deciding between a big fat bruise on your forehead or a knee to the groin. Just to make you remember, because I've found words haven't been working in that regard lately.'

'Oh, shut up. You'd be scratching too, and you know it,' he spat out. 'It's my right arm too, for god's sake. I hate using my left hand for everything.'

'Well,' she smiled humourlessly, 'look at it as practice then. You're performing less than perfect with that left hand of yours. Surely, you must know that you have to redeem that.'

Harry opened his mouth, but his reply was cut off by a loud sigh. Both Harry and Hermione's heads turned sharply and Ron eyed them tiredly. The red-headed boy sat up straight, then said slowly,

exasperatedly, 'I know we've had a shitty past few months. I know we wasted time tracking Lestrage and didn't succeed in that. I know we've been dodging hitmen and assassins practically every day since we declared war against the circles. But I also know that you guys are fucking annoying when you bitch at one another. I'm tired, okay? We're all tired. We've been sleeping in tents, or on the ground for god knows how long. I feel like I don't know what a bed is anymore. So let's all make-up and be friendly again. Or at least fake it, so I can keep the illusion that I've actually achieved something these holidays.'

Hermione scowled challengingly. 'Or?'

Ron looked at her with a calm gaze with blue eyes that didn't give anything away. 'I won't be nice.'

Harry didn't catch what thought Ron sent Hermione, but he was immediately intrigued, and somewhat amused, when Hermione blanched and quickly went back to her reading. But he took his chance and scratched at his scar, grinning at the looks of scorn Hermione sent his way over the top of her newspaper.

xXx

The moment they stepped into the Great Hall for the Welcoming Feast, they were struck by the din of voices, laughter and footsteps. Ron, Harry and Hermione slipped into their usual seat at the far end of the Slytherin Table, where they sat a small way from other students, but not enough to raise suspicion. Slytherin problems stayed in Slytherin, after all.

Harry found his eyes wandering to the teachers' table. There sat Snape, wearing a darker scowl than Harry remembered him ever having before. He seemed to be pointedly not looking at the two men sitting alongside him – the new additions to the staff. Harry watched them for a moment, the one man with dark hair, the other with three

claw-like scars down his face. From their interactions, Harry could see they were close, perhaps best friends, or even lovers; it was in the way they touched each other with such ease and familiarity. Harry wondered which one would be the next Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor, and wondered if he'd last, unlike the rest.

At a glance, he noticed Hermione frowning at the scarred man. Her eye narrowed and she turned to Harry in one sharp movement. 'When last was it full moon?' she whispered quickly.

'A week ago,' Harry answered, his thoughts racing at her question.

Hermione's expression became thoughtful and just when she looked ready to speak; Dumbledore came to stand behind the podium. As the Headmaster made the yearly announcements, Harry felt a pair of eyes on him. His gaze flickered to the dark-haired man, who stared back unabashedly. That is, till Dumbledore gestured to him and said, 'And I'd like to introduce our new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor – Sirius Black!'

There was a smattering of applause, one Harry hesitantly joined only after a moment. He knew that man's name, but from where he was hard-pressed to remember. He felt like it was important - very important - that he'd remember. But it lingered on the tip of his tongue, just out reach.

'We have to be careful,' Ron murmured after Dumbledore clapped his hands and the Feast appeared on platters and plates before them. 'That man's a werewolf.'

'You certain?' Harry shot back, narrowed eyes darting to the man next to Sirius Black, who was smiling and talking animatedly with Professor Sprout. Both Ron and Hermione sent a faint brush of certainty along the bond, the most they could allow as they suppressed the bond to keep it hidden from those who could feel it.

Harry speared a carrot with his fork and frowned down at his food. Did you feel those presences by the doorway too? he questioned in a thought he sent to his bonded, ignoring the stabbing pain of a headache that came as a result. They both glanced at him, then nodded.

'Aurors,' Ron hissed, then put his cutlery down and pushed his plate away. 'What are they doing here?'

Hermione looked over her shoulder at the Gryffindor Table to see a very disgruntled Neville Longbottom sullenly shoving his potatoes around his plate. Ron and Harry followed her gaze, then turned away – their expressions carefully neutral, holding just that little bit of Slytherin disdain. Harry fought back the scowl that threatened to surface.

Just what we need, he thought to himself, a contingent of Disillusioned Aurors playing body-guard to the Boy-Who-Lived, a werewolf under our noses and a mad woman traipsing through the wilderness to get to our gates.

When a Prefect stopped Harry on the stairway down to the dungeons after the Feast to tell him that Professor Dumbledore expected him in his office immediately, he cursed under his breath and said, 'Great. Just great.'

xXx

With Hermione's worried speculations and Ron's incessant advice running rife in his head as he walked up the winding stairway to the Headmaster's office, Harry had to stop mid-step to calm his mind. He took a deep breath, reprimanding his instincts for fearing the very worse (they could have been found out, or linked back to the Devil's Spawn, or to Durand Orexis' drug ring back in London, or maybe Dumbledore had somehow found a way to sense the dark magic they had used even though they had hidden that fact in every way

they could think of . . .).

Harry shoved all these thoughts and fears away. Then, when he had reached a certain level of clarity, he strengthened his Occlumency walls. Harry didn't want to think of the consequences of raising Dumbledore's suspicions because of his trained mind, but the other outcome, the one where Dumbledore gained proof of their misdemeanours, was a worse one. He had to take this risk.

He took in a deep breath, then let it out. Slowly, he carried on walking, working his expression into that of nervousness and confusion, still innocent like a young schoolboy's. He had to look his age, and while he tried to, he fervently wished Ron were in his place instead, since he could fool almost anyone. He stilled at the door when he heard voices.

'I don't see why he has to be here!' an unfamiliar voice exclaimed angrily.

'I have every right to be here, Black – the boy's in my House, after all,' the sneering voice of Severus Snape said. Harry felt a moment's indignation at being called a 'boy', especially in such a condescending way.

'Come, now,' Harry heard Dumbledore say, 'is this the proper way to act when the boy in question is right behind that door?'

Harry stiffened, then after a moment of silence, opened the door. He glanced uncertainly about, from one face to another. Snape stood in a corner, his arms crossed, a scowl firmly set in place on his face. Dumbledore sat behind his desk, smiling benignly. The scarred man sat on an armchair, looking thoughtful and a little surprised as he stared at Harry. Sirius Black, the new professor, had the strangest expression of all – he looked at Harry with wonder, a bit of awe even, and a joy that burned brightly in his grey eyes.

Harry unconsciously took a step back from the intensity of those eyes. He glanced at Snape, then to Dumbledore. 'Uhm, should I come back later, sir?' Harry asked.

'No, my boy,' Dumbledore said kindly. 'Take a seat. You're right on time.'

Harry nodded, then sat down, his hands shaking in his lap. 'Is . . . is there a problem, sir?' Harry asked, painfully polite, not looking the Headmaster in the eye for long.

'Not at all, Mr Potter. In fact, I'm the bearer of great news,' he nodded towards Sirius Black, who still stared at Harry dumbly, like he couldn't believe his eyes. 'I've been given the honour of introducing you to your godfather, Sirius Black.'

Silence filled the room, and Harry could almost feel the anticipation of his reaction thick as water wading around him. The word godfather echoed in his head, and for a moment, the word meant nothing, was nonsensical to him. He knew he had to react, perhaps in the way they clearly wanted him to – with joy at the prospect of a guardian and immediate forgiveness for not being there.

How do they expect me to react? Harry thought over and over again with fear. Then the fear turned into cold fury at the unfairness of this situation, as they all looked down upon him, as adults, as wiser beings than he. How do they expect me to react?

Harry brought his eyes to Sirius Black and simply stared. He now remembered the name of Sirius Black, but dimly, just as two words printed beneath his parents' names on his birth certificate. Just two words that meant nothing, since Harry had been so, so sure he had nothing left – no family, just Ron and Hermione, who were effectively alone as he was.

Godfather, he thought to himself. Godfather.

Harry didn't know whether he wanted to disappear into himself, or to shout till he was hoarse – both urges seemed reasonable. But not an option, he knew. He stared down at his hands - hands that were small and trembled against the cloth of his school robes.

'I see,' Harry said very quietly. He stood up, then nodded towards the men in the room distantly. 'Thank you for informing me, Professor. Since you have done your duty, I shall take my leave. Goodnight.'

Harry left silently, ignoring the voices calling after him. And as he walked away, along hidden passages so as to not be followed, he wondered if he really knew himself at all.

xXx

Author's Note: Voila, my addition for December – hoped you guys enjoyed it and all the new intrigue! I've finally planned everything out for third year (hence the longer than normal wait) and you're all in for a few surprise

Chapter 35 – Only This

Harry could see it there in the dim light; on the bedside table, seemingly innocent. The bottle gleamed in the candlelight, the yellow liquid inside calm and still. In his head, he listed the ingredients of the potion and went through the imagined steps of making it, letting his thoughts fall into a rhythm that cleared away feelings like nothing else could. He could almost see the pages of his potion journal, the hurried scrawl, the smudged ink . . .

. . . use a glass cauldron when mixing a Calming draught with a Strengthening Solution to neutralise the explosive properties -

Harry didn't look down when he felt his hands tremble against his chest. He knew he needed the potion . . . but to actually drink it, to feel its effects and depend on it, was a thought that filled him with shame. He was weak and weakening with every day, and they had no time to slow down and rest. It wasn't the best solution, but it was the only viable one he had, with the venom still lingering in his veins. But that didn't mean he didn't despise it any less.

He curled into himself on the bed, the sheets pulled over his shoulders. He could hear running water of the shower and could smell smoke. With a look over his shoulder, he saw Ron sitting on the edge of the bed, silhouetted against the bathroom light, a smoking cigarette hanging between two fingers. Sensing his stare, Ron turned to him, but Harry couldn't see his expression. Instead he felt it – the subtle wave of worry behind curiosity, and strangely enough, understanding of a sort beneath it all.

Harry ducked his head and closed his eyes, unsure of what he was supposed to feel. Gratitude for this sympathy, for this concern? He didn't know if he was thankful or hateful or merely resigned. It just ached.

'Harry?' Ron murmured. Then after a long moment of silence, the

bed creaked as he came close. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and the boy flinched away immediately. Finally, Ron said, 'You're not okay.'

'I'm just peachy,' Harry said bitingly.

There was long pause that Ron ended with, 'At least you're angry.'

'And that brilliant revelation of yours is supposed to help? Really, truly? Come on, you can't be that bad at cheering people up, Ron.'

'Blame it on lack of practice then,' Ron said idly, unfazed and quiet. 'I'm evidently not the coddling type.'

Harry snorted into his pillow, but quietened suddenly when he had to take in a shaky breath that pained his ribs. He gulped, then inhaled deeply before biting his lip. Shivers ran down his body, starting from a dazed shake of his head, and he groped forward, grabbing the potion. In one swift movement, he pulled it open and drank it. Harry winced as it burned down his throat, sluggishly covering his insides as it made its way down to his stomach, where it settled heavily, nauseatingly.

'Harry, do you - '

'No, I don't want to talk about it,' Harry said as he sat up in the bed, his head in his hands. 'I don't want to talk about any of it.'

'You promised to talk.'

'I said I'd try,' he said, 'and right now I don't feel like trying.'

xXx

Draco moved the candle closer, bringing it to the edge of the seat of the chair near his head. He straightened his back against the stone

wall behind him, shifting his legs into a cross-legged position on the dusty floor. He frowned down at the open book in his lap, fingering the corner of a page. He mouthed the words as he read, his eyes darting back and forth with each line.

'Episkey,' he whispered, then shook himself. He gripped his wand tightly with clammy hands, pointed it at his bloodied knuckles, then said louder, 'Episkey!'

The skin healed, though it was left slightly raw and pink. He touched it gingerly, then pointed his wandtip at his split lip, then his black-eye. When the bruises and blood disappeared, he sighed into the dark gloom. He glanced around at the empty room, a forgotten store far into dungeons, then closed his eyes when he felt the urge to cry. He wrapped his arms around his knees and hid his face in them.

It's only fists, it's only violence, he told himself softly. It's only words.

But in his mind's eye, he saw his housemates' smirking faces as they held his arms back, as they tauntingly twirled his wand around in his face, leaving him no way to defend himself. He flinched as he remembered each punch, each insult, each hex they had thrown at him. Draco had felt fear, and such shame, when he saw what was in their eyes – they saw him as a toy now, one who used to lord over them and therefore was victim to their retribution for the humiliation he had made them feel.

They were truly Slytherins – kicking the broken when they were on the floor already.

A part of him sneered at his choice of words in his thoughts. It was also the part that whispered angrily in the back of head, sounding eerily like his father, that he wasn't acting like the pureblood he was - by sitting on the floor, by crying so shamelessly, by being so plebeian as to show weakness, of which his housemates were quick to see. But Draco ignored that part of him, the remnant of his life before.

Instead he asked himself – what was the use of elegance, poise and dignity when one had no knowledge or power to defend one's life? Being elegant didn't make a person strong, and it certainly didn't stop his mother from killing herself.

Therefore, Draco saw no need for it. And so, one by one, the habits his father had drilled into him from birth fell away. He no longer held his back straight, his head high, a haughty expression fixed in place. Instead, he read.

In every waking moment he had had in the summer now past, he had pored over books upon books, mastering every spell he came across, no matter how much practice it took. Knowledge was power; he knew this with a deep, terrible certainty. And it was all that would soon matter, when he was alone with no parents and a useless elegance to protect him from the world. For that reason, Draco wouldn't let his enemies' fists stop him – for he had something he wanted to do, something that was purely for himself and had no reason behind it. And because of it, he would pick up all the pieces and mend himself. He would change himself into some other shape. He was going to become someone else – someone perfect. Perfect in the sense of resilience and knowledge.

He had to be perfect.

Because why else would Harry Potter want to be friends with him?

xXx

'I hate this. I hate all of this.'

Neville Longbottom scowled at the rug under his feet, then glared across at his best friend, Dean Thomas, as he made a soft 'mmm' noise in reply when he turned a page of a rather large tome on his lap. The boy didn't look up, nor did he see the frustration that sparked in Neville's eyes.

'I hate that they watch me all the time. I can't hear them, see them or feel them, but I know they're there. And it's infuriating,' he said fervently, his gaze flickering from one corner of the Gryffindor Common Room to the next, as if the shadows would reveal something plain sight could not.

'They can hear you, you know,' Dean said absently, and for a moment Neville was sure he had heard a tinge of amusement in his words too.

'I don't care,' Neville snapped, getting up out of his armchair to pace in front of the crackling fireplace. The Common Room was empty of students at this time of night, so they had claimed the couches next to the fireplace, the unquestionably best spot in the room, soon after the Seventh Years had gone to bed.

Neville paced around a bit, anger spiking in his gut, his fists clenched. I don't need these stupid Aurors, I don't need their 'protection' and I certainly don't need their advice on 'dealing with' my anger, he thought furiously. I just want them to leave me alone.

He stopped mid-step, conscious of the silence and Dean's lack of response. Neville grabbed the tome, swung it off Dean's lap and onto the couch, right out of his friend's hands. 'Don't ignore me,' Neville hissed, glaring at the inscrutable look that Dean gave him. 'Don't bloody ignore me. I want to complain, and I want someone to listen.'

'Oi, am I not enough?' came a slightly indignant voice behind Neville.

The Boy-Who-Lived looked over his shoulder briefly, and said, 'Shut up. Of course you are, mate.'

Seamus Finnigan waved his quill around, letting ink splatters fly onto his Divination homework he had been busily doing, last minute as usual. 'All right, Nev. Leave Dean alone then and shout at me to your

heart's content, 'cause we Irish love a good row. I've got a few nasty curses up my sleeve that I'm keen to try out, yeah.'

Neville gave Seamus a small grin, then glanced back at Dean. He frowned when he saw that both the boy and the book were gone, and only a long shadow walking up the stairway to the dormitories showed where he'd gone.

'I know you're angry, but we're not the ones in the wrong here. We're your best mates, remember?' Seamus said, dipping his quill in an ink bottle. 'We're not your enemies, and definitely not Lestrage.'

Such anger boiled in Neville when he heard that name – that name he had despised for most of his life – so much so he was frightened of himself. He sat down on the couch and closed his eyes, trying to centre himself, then whispered, 'I know, mate. I know.'

xXx

Harry slid into a desk at the back of the classroom, closest to the door where students were filing in. Hermione sat down next to him, leaving Ron to take the seat in front of them. Dumping his bag on the floor at his feet, Harry kept his eyes away from Hermione's, ignoring the warning look she was giving him. He knew it was foolish to pull away from the bond, but it was only thing he could think of to do, because Ron and Hermione seemed so anxious to see, to feel, any response from him. But he had no definite answer, no definite feeling to share.

He felt like he was in a strange sort of limbo, where he seesawed between hope and despair so rapidly, leaving a jumble of emotion he didn't understand. He didn't know how to deal with it, or explain it.

At the front of the classroom, Sirius Black sat on his table, swinging his legs back and forth through the air, letting his gaze drift across the room from face to face nonchalantly. He did pause when he saw

Harry, but the boy refused to look him in the eye for long.

'Well!' Black exclaimed, clapping his hands together, effectively gathering everyone's attention and silence. 'Hello,' he smiled a toothy grin at all of them, 'I'm your new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. The name's Sirius Black. And let me get this straight, I really don't want all this 'professor' and 'sir' nonsense – call me Sirius, all right?' He put his hand next to his mouth as if to whisper, 'Being called 'professor' makes me feel old.'

A few students chuckled at this.

'As you can see,' he pointed a finger at his handsome face, 'I'm clearly not as old as, say, the Headmaster, or dear Professor Flitwick.' He grinned at the smiles he saw. 'Yeah, thought so.'

Black jumped off the table and stood in front of them, hands on his hips, a slight frown on his face. 'Now, I've heard all about your rocky start in Defence Against the Dark Arts, what with your teachers leaving, or taking up the infamous, and stupid, career of being a fraud. And this means that we – yeah, me included – have a lot of work ahead of us.'

Over the following half-hour, Black ran them through every creature and spell they were to learn over the next term, writing a long list of books they'd have to bring and such. Hermione had that small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth that told Harry all he needed to know – she had always respected professors who got right to the point and didn't waffle. Black guided them through everything, at a pace allowing the slow ones to catch up and made sure the fast ones didn't feel stifled. It was delicate balance, one which Harry could see how much of a challenge it was, but still . . . the anger he felt towards Black wasn't going away and wouldn't any time soon. But should he feel admiration, though small it was, for this man who wasn't there for so, so long?

Just before the end of class, as the students were packing up their bags and chattering amongst themselves excitedly, Black looked up from behind his desk. 'Oh, Potter, can you stay a bit after class?'

A few glances were sent Harry's way, but then the bell rang and all curiosity was swept away by the sound of freedom it represented. Harry let himself be pulled along with the crowd and he disappeared in the sea of faces of the packed hallway. When he heard Black give out a call behind him from the classroom, he ran, slipping past startled students, his books clutched tightly to his chest.

No, he thought grimly. You weren't there, and I won't be either, you bastard.

xXx

31 July 1980.

Harry stared down at the date on the medical records he had pilfered from Madam Pomfrey's files. She had been on her nightly rounds, checking on patients in her ward, when he had slipped into her office, and then out into the dark hallways of Hogwarts. He straightened out the page with his hands, smoothing it against his legs.

It was strange – he had never known his birthday. He had never asked. Or rather, he had had no-one to ask.

For a while, he sat there counting under his breath, till he stopped and rubbed his face with a hand. Four thousand, eight-hundred and seventy-one days – that was how long he had lived. But then again, he told himself, that was only a number. A birthday, a date, a series of numbers put together that made up a useless fact of life, one he should've been privy to. But it didn't matter. Not a lot of things mattered in the face of the revenge he had chosen. Something as mundane as a birthday didn't make up who he was.

Memories did. And so did actions.

Chapter 36 – Like Eating Glass

There was a slight mist above the lake, one Harry could see in the dawn light. He rolled a pebble he'd picked up earlier in his hand, over and over again, because the smoothness of it oddly fascinated him. Well, it was more that concentrating on it made his mind clear, free of thoughts of the difficult things in his life, and most of all, the choices he had not yet made. Harry clenched his hand into a fist, let out a deep breath, then threw the pebble at the water and watched it skip a few times before sinking.

He had come out here to think, as he knew he had to. As he let go, immediately his mind cast him back to running through corridors blindly, away - far, far away - from Sirius Black's voice calling out to him desperately. A voice he had begun to despise at how unsettled it made him, more so with every word, with every lingering sad look sent his way. Harry gripped his knees tightly to stop himself from punching something, anything. He knew he was angry at Black. But he also knew that the hurt far out-weighed the anger.

One question doggedly stayed in his mind: Why wasn't he there?

He knew he hadn't given the man a chance to explain himself, but a large part of him didn't want to listen to excuses. He was being irrational and as unforgiving as always, but it hurt, it ached to walk away from his godfather every time. Harry found it strange, the whole situation utterly stupid – he knew he shouldn't be like this, so absurd and unlike himself, but the more he tried to contain himself, the more he lost control. Maybe it was better to pull away from everyone. Maybe that would give him time to deal with himself . . .

But they had no time for this, for breaking down.

Harry knew that, knew that with a cutting certainty, but he was still torn, still lingering on the brink of indecision. He couldn't deny the longing anymore, the one that left him breathless at the thought of

belonging, of having a real family. He had always been sure he had nothing left, so much so he had never lent any thought to what it could be like to have someone there, someone to lean on, someone like a father. He knew he had Ron and Hermione, as a nagging thought always reminded him, but this was different, so very different from that bond. Sharing emotions like they did in nearly every moment made them seem like a part of Harry, not ever separate. Ron and Hermione were only extensions of himself and he couldn't escape them, no matter how much he ran.

And Harry wanted something away from it all – all the darkness of their life, the fear, the pain and the rage . . .

He wanted a godfather.

But even as he acknowledged this longing, the shame was never far away. That side of him that would forever burn with the desire for revenge snarled whenever he thought of seeking out Sirius Black. It was the side of him that had no time for such weakness - that made him feel sick to his stomach with shame at how he had been acting lately. It was the hard part of him that pierced him with questions at every possibility: Did he really have the time to waste on such foolishness as moping? How could he even consider giving into this crazy desire of having a family? They couldn't risk having burdens, or such an obvious weak spot as having family ties. Ron had made sure everyone knew he was in no way connected to his family, to protect them as well as hurt them. Why couldn't Harry be as cold as Ron? Wasn't he strong enough to fulfil his revenge?

Harry rolled his hands into fists and clenched his jaw. He knew what he had to do, but sometimes, he felt like he was two completely different people. And they had two very different ideas on how this situation would end.

Even so, in his heart, he knew what he had to do. . .

'Harry?' a voice called out, causing the boy to startle and whip his head around.

Hermione stood a small distance away, her hood pulled up and her hands stuffed into her pockets. The look she gave him was neutral, and Harry guessed this was because he'd been a little unpredictable lately, cut off from the bond and brooding, prone to using fists first in fights rather than words. He had brought this coolness from her on himself – and one side of him hated it, while the other relished it.

'What are you doing here?' Hermione asked, looking out at the still waters of the lake. 'Especially this early.'

Harry stared at her for a long moment, then looked away and shrugged. 'Isn't that none of your business?'

Hermione's gaze became cold. 'It is my damn business,' she nearly hissed. 'And I'll have you know that I'm fucking angry with you, Harry Potter.'

Harry found himself smiling at that. It was nice to know some things didn't change, and Hermione being a spitting hellcat was one of them. 'I know.'

'And do tell me then, smart-ass, do you also know that I'm worried about you?'

'Yes, I do,' he chuckled, tossing her a smirk. 'I know you're worried in your own little twisted way, Hermione. Does that appease you now? Have I done good in admitting what you want?'

Harry didn't flinch when Hermione pulled her pistol out and pointed it at him. She twisted it to the side and stared at him down its length. Silence stretched between them, thick and vile, till Hermione broke it by cocking the gun. 'You know as well as I do that if I shoot you we'll both feel the pain when the bullet pierces your skin and rips through

muscle and shatters bone. You know that if you die, I'll die too. It's a foregone conclusion, really, with this bond. And even if you kill me before I kill you, we won't be the only ones to die. Somewhere in that castle over there, Ron will scream his last.'

Harry didn't give into the challenge in her eyes. 'So?'

Hermione put the gunpoint to her temple, a grim little smile settling on her face. 'How about a bit of Russian Roulette then, one third of my soul?'

Harry watched her steadily, unimpressed. 'You are many things, Hermione, but suicidal you are not.'

She moved her finger closer to the trigger and retorted mockingly, 'So? Does that matter when this is all a game?'

'It's not a game,' Harry hissed, slightly fearful of the seriousness reflected in her eye.

'Well, when I look at you – life certainly seems like a game. You look like you have all the time in the world to fuck around, like you have second chances and nothing to avenge. I look at you and see a child. And don't children play games, hmmm? They play games all the time.'

'Hermione - '

The world seemed to slow down when Harry saw her smile widen into a shark-like grin and as she pulled the trigger. An unbearable dread dropped to the bottom of his stomach in the split second he was sure was going to feel pain, feel death strangle him and drag him into darkness, long before the feeling of absolute uselessness of this moment did.

But it didn't come.

He didn't realise he had reached out, or that he had shouted out, but he heard the echoes. Hermione lowered the gun, her expression fond as she looked at it. Then her gaze flickered to him and became stony. 'I guess we were lucky this time,' she said coolly.

Hermione turned around and glanced at him over her shoulder, then said, 'Grow up and face the reality of what we chose, Harry. Or otherwise, we may be unlucky next time. Or maybe I'll think it a lot of fun to make sure it's fully-loaded. Not sure what whim I will take a fancy to – but I guess life's like that, right? Full of random shit.'

Only after Hermione had disappeared, Harry took a deep gulp of air and clutched his shaking hands to his chest. It was then he closed his eyes and forced himself not to cry.

Or perhaps laugh. He wasn't sure.

xXx

'What should I do?'

Sirius Black paced up and down the length of the room, almost frantically. Now and then, he'd run a hand through his hair, dragging the shaggy black strands back, then rub his eyes as if the action would shed some clarity on his thoughts. By the fire-place, Remus Lupin watched the man silently, speculatively with yellowed eyes.

'I don't know what to do, Remus,' Sirius burst out after a moment of tense silence. 'I don't know what more to do – I try to talk to him, but he disappears. He sits at the very back of the class and doesn't even look at me. And I swear by Merlin, the one time I caught his eye, there was such disdain in them.'

'Sirius, calm down,' Remus tried, but he knew was going to be ignored in favour of a rant.

'Does he hate me that much? Oh, Remus, have I failed James and Lily? If Harry can't forgive me – I don't know if I can forgive myself. I don't know what to do! What if Harry doesn't want me here? What if he rejects us? I just shoved myself into his life without his consent – so, so selfishly without a thought to what he wanted. How could I be so stupid?'

'Should I send him a letter, Remus?' Sirius asked suddenly and hopefully, then frowned, stopped and turned around. He ran to his desk and started shoving parchments here and there madly, muttering to himself, 'Where's that damn quill?'

Remus sighed, then slowly came up to Sirius and touched his shoulder. Immediately, the man stilled. Remus waited patiently till he heard Sirius take in a deep, shaky breath and then let it out, the tension reluctantly leaving his body. 'I think Harry will sooner burn a letter from you than read it,' Remus said gently.

'What can I do then?' Sirius whispered.

Remus wrapped his arms around him, and murmured into his ear, 'You can only wait for Harry to come to you, my love.'

Sirius turned around in his arms and buried his face in Remus' neck. 'But what if he never does?'

xXx

They were whispering again.

Harry scowled down at his breakfast, refusing the urge to reach out to the bond. It would be so easy, to just slip into it again, to feel and know their thoughts as effortlessly as he knew his own. But as Harry watched Ron and Hermione, their shoulders touching, her moving lips near his ear, the knowing looks they gave each other periodically,

he realised he wanted the emptiness pulling away from the bond brought.

Though, it was lonely.

'Look,' Hermione said, pointing at the Daily Prophet's headline. She grinned at Ron, to which he returned with a smirk. 'Justice is served.'

Harry leaned forward and took the paper. His eyes widened as he read: Lockhart Gets Life in Azkaban! He read the article, his eyes darting back and forth with each line, till he sat back with a small smile. He guessed it was the feeling of satisfaction of a job well done, but he felt like laughing. They had left some evidence here and there, nudged a few people into finding them, and then this: sweet revenge, and best of all, with minimal effort.

Harry had forgotten how much of a thrill it was. . . to hurt someone who deserved it.

Involuntarily, his eyes rose up to the teacher's table and found Sirius Black. He gulped, wary of where his thoughts were going, but he couldn't help himself. Was he really sure Black deserved retribution for abandoning him? He shook his head and looked down at the table again.

'Come, we've got an appointment with Snape,' Ron said as he stood up, causing Harry to blink at him. Ron sneered down at him, 'Remember? Before class starts? I reminded you earlier about this.'

Harry glared at him. 'Whatever. Let's go.'

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Severus watched them as they quietly took their seats. One by one, their eyes came to rest on him, all steady, mostly unreadable, but all different. It took Severus a moment to realise how intertwined these

three seemed, so much so they couldn't be separated in his mind. Well, not easily. But for the first time, he was almost baffled at how singular they seemed, especially in front of him – the known 'Death Eater' whom they always were a united front before.

Had something changed?

'As you surely know by now,' Severus started, clasping his hands together on his desk, 'your psychologist, Mr Nathan Riley, passed away this summer.'

'Why don't you say it as it is, sir?' Potter cut in. 'Mr Riley didn't pass away, he was murdered.'

Severus stared at the boy steadily. The man hadn't missed the exasperated glance Granger had thrown at the boy, nor the way Weasley's expression tightened, then closed off the second Potter opened his mouth. From the years of being a spy, Severus had an appreciation for the little things, because they revealed so much. But as he looked at Potter, the one thing remarkably different about the boy was the defiance. He was sure it had never been there before, and if it had, certainly not in such force.

It reminded Severus of someone else, someone long gone, someone he'd rather not think of.

'Yes, Mr Riley was murdered,' Severus said evenly, his expression unchanged. 'And since he can no longer offer his services, it has come to my attention that you three are in need of a new psychologist.'

Potter snorted derisively, while Granger's expression became concerned as she asked, 'So soon?'

'I would think it wise to continue your treatment,' Severus said, then looked at Potter pointedly. 'Especially since this incident was so

sudden.'

Potter gave him a dark, mutinous look in return.

'With all due respect, sir, I think we need time to mourn,' Weasley said quietly, sombrely. 'After all, Mr Riley was one of first people we've opened up to in a long time.'

'I see,' Severus said slowly. He straightened a pile of papers on his desk absently and he didn't look at them as he added, 'I have been informed by Professor Sprout of your group sessions with the other ES victims in your year and she had expressed some doubts as to whether you need them at all. She said she would welcome you three back with open arms if you choose to still go to these meetings, but she also said that if you don't join in, then the benefits of this kind of therapy will not arise.' He glanced up at Potter, Granger and Weasley. 'So? What shall I tell her?'

'Please tell Professor Sprout we won't attend the sessions anymore, sir,' Granger said after a long moment and a thoughtful look shared with Weasley.

'Thank Merlin, I hated them,' Potter muttered acidly, loud enough for Severus to hear.

'Frankly, sir, we never felt comfortable in the group,' Weasley said, almost apologetically.

'You do not have to explain yourselves to me. Your views on this matter are very evident,' he sneered slightly. 'You three are dismissed. Go.'

It was only long after they had left his office that he relaxed in his chair. He glanced at the drawer of his desk, musing over the firewhiskey inside. But he ran a hand down his face and sat up, dismissing those thoughts since it was far too early in the morning

still. Instead, he brought his mind back to Harry Potter, the boy enigma in his midst.

Severus had a feeling he only knew a little, but what he had learned was enough for now.

What he had found was telling.

Imagine a home that was so ordinarily muggle and lacked even a whisper of magical residue – that was the home Harry Potter had been sent to. Severus had to stop himself from shivering at the thought. It must've been like living in a place that had no air. But it soon became apparent, when Severus walked through the rooms of the Dursley's household, that the boy hadn't lived there in a long time – years, in fact. There were no pictures of Potter on the walls, no evidence of a room that was his own, nor any items that had his magical imprint left on them. But what frightened Severus the most was when he had called up the memories of the house embedded in the walls. All they showed was a ghostly image of a small boy sitting on the hallway floor, while the sound of a terrifying wailing filled the house and Severus' heart with a strange and cold fear.

Something happened to Potter in that house, of that Severus was sure.

And it was enough to make the boy run away and never return.

But the real question was: where was the boy living if not with his relatives?

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'Nice going, Harry,' Ron said sarcastically when they entered the safety of their rooms in the dungeons. 'Your childishness has no brought that man's suspicions down on us. You skilfully made a perfectly workable situation into a difficult one. Thank you very

much.'

'Pleasure doing business with you,' Harry said, mockingly tipping an invisible hat at Ron.

'Your efforts are not appreciated.'

The smile on Harry's face fell away. 'You've made that abundantly clear.'

Ron lit a cigarette and flicked the lighter's flame out. He cocked his head to side, his gaze cruel, 'Oh, really? Nice to know you think that. On the other hand, I think you're terribly mistaken. You don't even have a clue as to what you've done. And I'm not feeling very forgiving today.'

Harry looked at Hermione at Ron's side and stiffened. The girl was smiling as she pointed two fingers at her head, her hand in the shape of a gun. Harry felt a sudden, in comprehensible rage take hold of him and he lunged at Hermione. The force of his punch made her smack against the stone floor. She pushed herself up to her knees unsteadily, a hand over one side of her face. She stared at his bloody knuckles amusedly from the floor.

'You know what this bond is like for me?!' Harry yelled at them. 'It's like drinking poison, like eating glass! I don't want to know your precious feelings! I don't want to hear your oh-so important thoughts! I want to be alone! Just fucking alone, okay?!'

Hermione looked up at his face, a wide grin on her face. Her shoulders started to shake, then she snorted, then started laughing till she had tears in her eye. 'You're bloody funny, Potter!' she choked out. 'You chose this bond and now you're having a tantrum because you don't want it anymore. It's like you've forgotten what Voldemort did to you. It's like you've forgotten what you vowed to do.' She chuckled into her bloody hand, revealing the broken skin of her

bruising cheek. 'You're a fucking joke, you know that? The best I've ever seen.'

Harry wanted to hurt her so, so badly, but her words swirled around in his head like a maelstrom. He bit his lip till he tasted blood, then turned and ran from his bonded. He couldn't look at them, and most of all, he couldn't look at himself because he knew all he would see was a weak and pathetic child, instead of the cold-hearted killer he'd fashioned himself as.

As he ran, he didn't know who he was anymore.

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Author's Note: Sorry for the extremely long wait for this, but this new year has been royally hectic for me – it's my last year of school, after all. And frankly, over these past months, this story has changed in my mind so many times that I've lost count. Hope you enjoy this chapter anyway :) psssst – it's longer than usual!

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